橘公司
(Speakeasy)
Koushi Tachibana
Illustration
はいむらきよたか
kyomo, sekai wo sukuokka
jinruinokibou wo korosu
いつか世界を救うために
―クオリディア・コード―
ファンタジア文庫

Table of Contents

Credits
Illustrations
Prologue 1: An Observer
Prologue 2: Hime and Hotaru
Chapter 1: Princess of the Bladed City
Chapter 2: Stalking
Chapter 3: [Silent] and [Aegis]
Chapter 4: A Date Between an Assassin and his Target.
Chapter 5: Despair That Creeps From the Horizon
Epilogue: The Visitor.

橘公司
Koushi Tachibana
(SpeciaKeers)
Illustration
はいむらきよたか
kyomo, sekai wo sukuokka
いつか世界を救うために
―クオリディア・コード―
jinruinokibou wo korosu
ファンタジア文庫

Qualidea Code: Itsuka Sekai wo Sukuu Tame ni - Volume 1

Associated Names:

Qualidea Code: For Some Day We'll Save The World
□□□□□□□□□□ —□□□□□□□□□□—

Author: Tachibana Koushi
Artist: Haimura Kiyotaka

Translators-sama: **Psyren - PFC**

This a fan translation of the Light Novel Version.
For any trouble regarding the Epub, feel free to rant or complain at Regarding Being Saved by AMLNVN, I'll try to fix it.

Index

Illustrations

Prologue 1: An Observer

Prologue 2: Hime and Hotaru

Chapter 1: Princess of the Bladed City

Chapter 2: Stalking

Chapter 3: [Silent] and [Aegis]

Chapter 4: A Date Between an Assassin and his Target.

Chapter 5: Despair That Creeps From the Horizon

Epilogue: The Visitor.

Illustrations

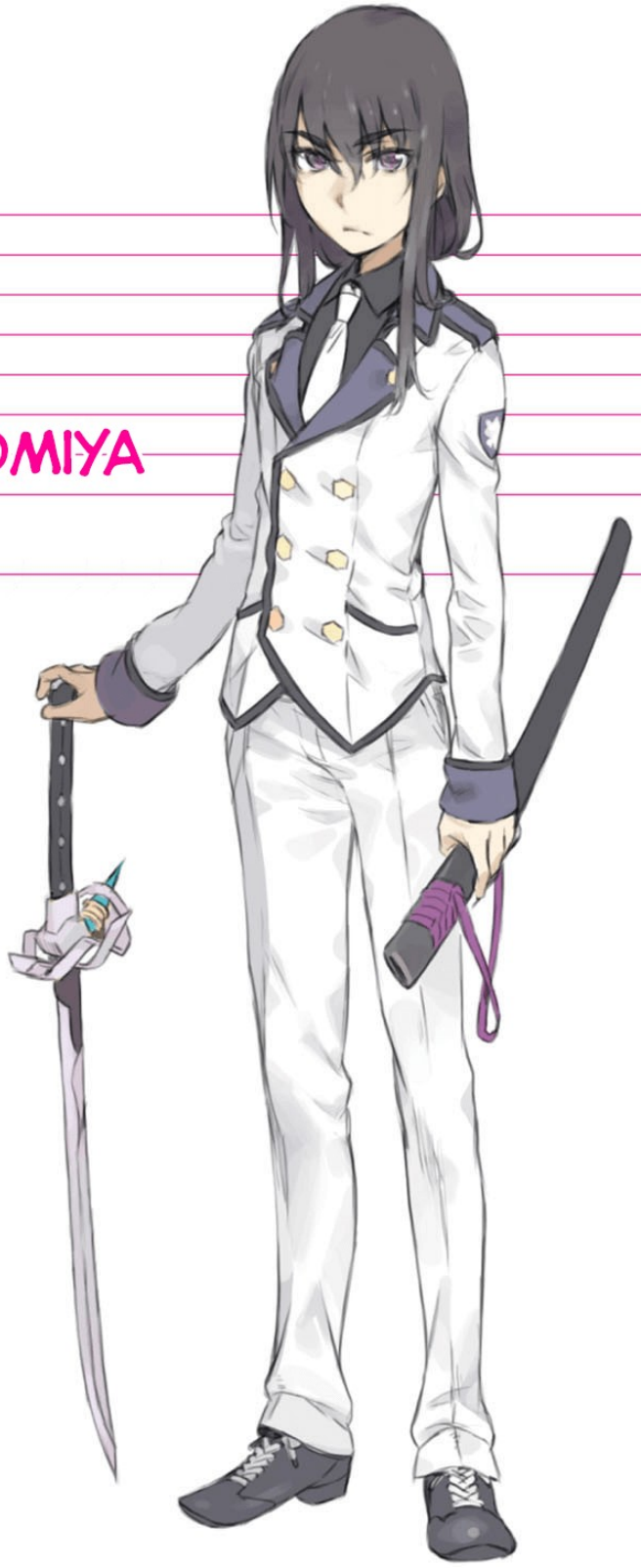
橘公司
Koushi Tachibana
(SpeciaKeers)
Illustration
はいむらきよたか
kyomo, sekai wo sukuokka
いつか世界を救うために
―クオリディア・コード―
jinruinokibou wo korosu
ファンタジア文庫

"..... UPPER ARMS, LOWER ARMS, THEY'RE ALL BELOW AVERAGE. THE KIND OF PHYSICAL STRENGTH IN THOSE ARMS IS JUST UNBELIEVABLE."
いつか世界を救うために
―クオリディア・コード―

GINKO
SAJIHARA
ZAKURO
OTONASHI
MAIHIME
TENKAWA
AOI
YAEGAKI
KURISU
NABARIYA

"WHAT WAS THAT JUST NOW? HOW'D YOU READ MY ATTACK?"
"YOU'RE PRETTY STRONG... UMM...BY THE WAY, I'VE NEVER HEARD YOUR NAME, HAVE I?

AKIRA
SHINOMIYA



Prologue 1: An Observer

Everything begins with observation.

This was something that Akira Shinomiya, or Shino, always believed in. From just their sight alone, humans could comprehend most of their surroundings. The exact amount was debatable, but most would agree that it ranged from eighty to ninety percent of what they could see. Now, if there was a specific thing that they wanted to know more about, there was but one thing they needed to do…

Indeed, they needed to observe it.

It was said that a picture was worth a thousand words— a simple glance at anything would reveal more about it than pages of text. That did seem like a ridiculous ratio, but even the most conservative of thinkers would not disagree with such a fact.

With that being said, vision played a huge part in people's lives. Of all the five senses, it was the one that could gather information the fastest.

And that's why Shino kept on observing… through the vent of a girl's room. He kept completely still as he peered through the cracks, staying so silent that even his breathing was muted.

The room almost looked like something out of a high-end hotel. The floor was sparkling clean, and a majestic looking bed with the pillars and all around it stood tall within the room. An intricately designed shelf was near, with stuffed animals and other accessories placed on top of it. Looking at the shelf, it was clear that the room had someone who regularly cleaned it. In order for things not to be accidentally disposed of, everything was placed on the shelf. It actually kind of looked like a birthday cake with decorations.

As Shino continued to peak into the room, a single girl hummed (albeit badly) as she walked into view. Her hair was dyed white and neatly tied into two pigtails. Her front bangs slightly covered her face, and her pupils were red. So red, in fact, that it was almost the color of blood, but at the same time, her eyes did look quite dignified. From the looks of it, she was about 145 cm in height and about seventeen to eighteen years old, so she was quite petite compared to other girls her age. Her slender arms and legs accompanied her small figure, and they too looked as fragile as ever.

But, as small physically as she may be, she was wearing the most prestigious uniform of all. Her uniform, completely white all around, indicated that she alone was responsible for the safety of the city. Alongside

the uniform, an overcoat clung onto her shoulders with the help of some fancy shoulder straps.
The girl's name was Tenkawa Maihime, the strongest fighter in this city. Indeed, she was the head of the city of defense, Kanagawa. Shino already knew that, however… she was a girl he had to kill.
Shino continued to stare, and Maihime continued to hum. Finally, she took off her overcoat, hung it up, and started to unbutton her uniform. Surely she came into this room to change as she continued to undress. First her jacket, then her necktie, and finally, her shirt…
Shino opened his eyes wider and wider, and stuffed his face through the cracks of the vent. It was only natural; there weren't many opportunities to see Maihime's naked body up close. That being said, it wasn't like he was aroused by the sight. No, this was something slightly different.
"Biceps… below average. Forearms… below average. How can she have such strength with those arms?" whispered Shino, careful not to alert Maihime.
Maihime didn't seem to notice at all. "Ah, I forgot," she suddenly said as she walked to the closet. At this point, she was only in her bra and underwear.
Shino stared even harder than before. This time, she was staring at Maihime's breasts and butt. Or rather, it would be more appropriate to say Maihime's chest and quad muscles. He was studying their movements closely.
Maihime stuck her head into the closet and fidgeted around for a bit. She continued to hum as she took out some casual clothes and spread them out onto the bed. It was then that she finally started to unbutton her bra.
Shino leaned forward in anticipation. Too forward, though, as the metal fixtures in the vent gave through, and Shino suddenly found himself right in front of Maihime as he dropped down.
"Whaa???" shouted Maihime, bewildered. It was not an unexpected reaction. After all, someone did literally just drop down into her room.
But Shino calmly got himself up. It wasn't like he was perfectly calm, though… he was shaking a little. The person right in front of him was the city's strongest fighter, so one wrong move meant certain death. Despite that, there was no way he could show any weakness at all. He may have been flustered on the inside, but he breathed calmly as to not show any of it on the outside. He kept a straight expression, an expression so nonchalant that it was as if nothing had happened.
"W-What are you doing…?" said Maihime, still a bit shaken up. Her eyes suddenly got wide, and she tried covering herself up with her hands as she rushed to pick up the clothes she had laid down earlier. She was embarrassed, and her red face clearly showed it all.
"Wait. Calm down," said Shino. His expression was as calm as ever as he motioned a 'hold on'. "I got lost, and before I knew it, I ended up here. I wasn't doing anything suspicious or anything…"

Maihime just stared back blankly with her wide open eyes. “Ah, so that’s it, huh?” she said after a short pause. She breathed a sigh of relief and loosened up.
“Honestly, try not to do that again, okay? It’s bad enough for other people to suddenly see you fall in, not to mention it’s pretty dangerous for you…”
“Sorry. I’ll be more careful next time.”
“…. Alright. Well, exit is that way.”
“Got it, thanks,” nodded Shino, slowly making his way to the door. However, just as he opened the door, he suddenly stood face to face with another girl.
“Woah!!” shouted the girl. She was wearing glasses, and it seemed like she was just about to knock on the door.
Shino once again kept a straight face and simply said, “Excuse me.” He slid out through the girl and walked out onto the hallway.
The girl stood there dazed for a few moments, but soon regained her composure. “Umm… that guy just now… was he….”
“Oh, yeah,” said Maihime. “He apparently was just someone who got lost and fell in here through those vents.”
The girl took another glance at Maihime. “Then… what are you even wearing?”
“This? I wanted to change outfits, you know… Actually, can you fix the vent thingy now? Seems like someone unscrewed this thing…”
“Well… Umm… I think that was probably….” the girl said hesitantly.
“Huh?” Maihime paused for a few moments, thinking. Then suddenly she frantically ruffled through her clothes, and with her face completely red, she took off running.
“W-Wait… Calm down!” shouted the girl, but there was no stopping Maihime. With a beast-like roar, Maihime caught up to Shino and smacked him right in the face.
—
“…”
The first thing Shino saw when he opened his eyes was an all too familiar room ceiling.
He then heard a voice.
“Oh? You’re awake?”
The voice sounded vaguely familiar as well, so Shino turned to see who it was— it was a girl with a ponytail. Her name was Rindou Hotaru, and similar to Shino, she too was an agent assigned to Kanagawa.
“Hotaru, huh?”
“Thank goodness. Seems like you can still think properly,” said Hotaru jokingly.
Shino slowly got up. His cheeks were wrapped up with ointment, but they were still hurting quite badly.
“That’s why I told you not to do stuff like that!” scolded Hotaru. “If you get too close too carelessly, it’s dangerous…”

From the start, Hotaru was completely against the idea of going near Maihime. What she said was completely reasonable… Or perhaps it was just common sense? In any case, Shino's actions earlier certainly lacked such things.
"You could die just like that, you know?"
"Don't say that… I got some good intel. We really do need to observe from up close. Plus…" Shino's voice cut out.
Hotaru stared back with a blank face. "Plus?"
"As I thought, she's really afraid of letting out her secrets," said Shino as he pressed down on the gauze wrapped around his cheek. "And that attack… there's no doubt she's dangerous."
"Y-Yeah…" replied Hotaru nervously. For some reason, sweat was dripping down her cheek.

Prologue 2: Hime and Hotaru

Why? Who knows, but the world seemed like it was ending. The sky was a color never seen before, and below it, two young girls were sitting on a bench out in the park. The park was quite close to the coast, so the two gazed out into the ocean.

They were completely alone, but that in itself was expected. After all, there was no telling when the <Enemy> would attack, so the only people who would loiter out here were the crazy ones. Well, perhaps two lovers who lived far away from each other would also risk going out to meet each other. In any case, compared to any of those people, the two sitting right now were in much more danger.

“Hotaru…”

“Hm? What is it, Hime?” said Hotaru softly, but Hime would not respond. Hime really didn’t have much to say; she just wanted hear Hotaru’s voice. Hotaru, knowing this, simply smiled and lightly touched the back of Hime’s hand.

“It’s quiet, isn’t it?” continued Hotaru as she kept gazing out into the ocean.

Hime nodded. “Yeah…”

The ocean was as calm as could be. It was perfectly still; there weren’t even any waves crashing against the shore. There was nothing but silence in the air, and as they had done so many times before, the two just peacefully stared at the view. It wasn’t like there was any particular reason for them to choose this place as their meeting spot, they just happened to always play around the area. However, within them there was definitely some desire to see the ocean like this, because in this ever-changing world, the only thing that didn’t really change was this view.

“It’s so peaceful… it’s almost as if the stuff that’s happening right now is a lie,” said Hotaru.

“I know,” said Hime. “Though, I wish that was true…”

Hotaru clutched Hime’s hand even harder. They were both still young, so in reality, they didn’t fully know what was going on in the world. Well, it would be more accurate to say that *no one* knew what was going on in this world. The two only understood that the world had changed, and everything that they once knew had turned into something different.

Three years ago in June, the <Enemies> appeared. No one knew who they were, and no one knew where they came from. These unknown entities came to the cities with their unknown machinery and began their attack. At

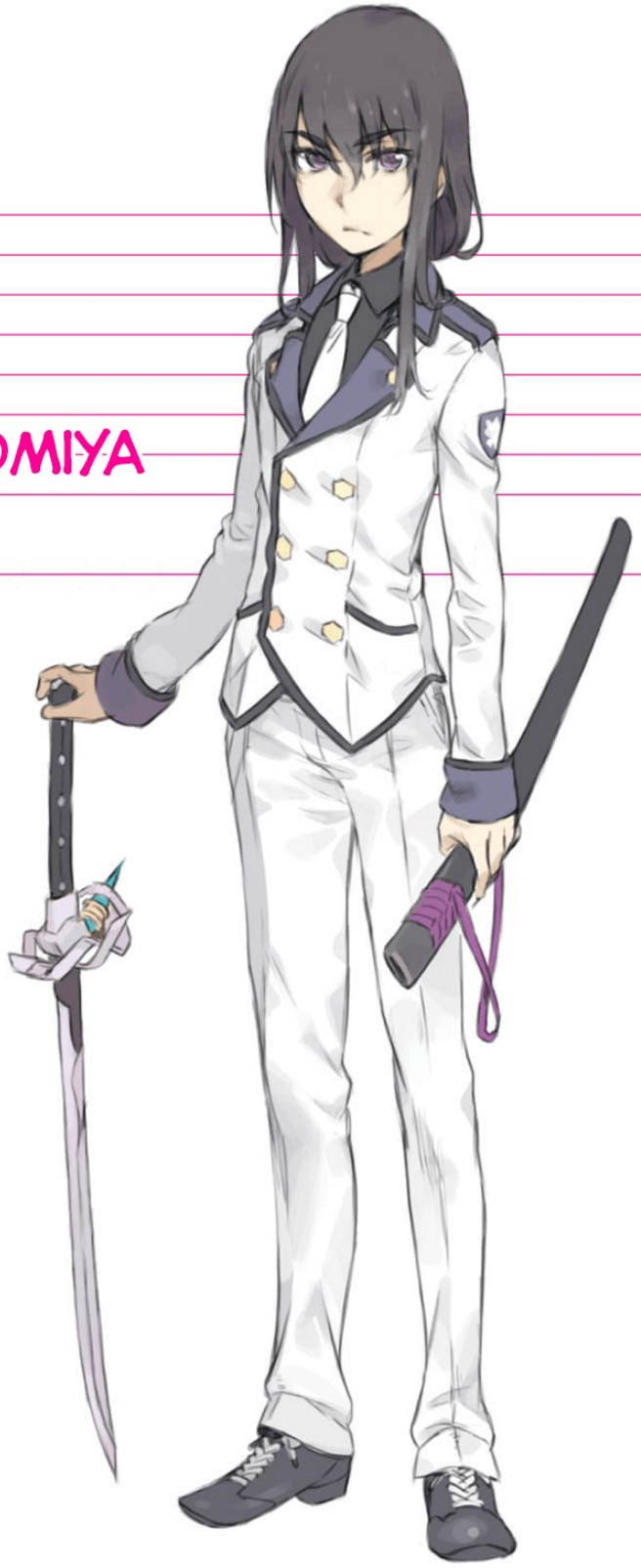
first, the higher-ups gave these entities a sophisticated name, but in the end, they just became known as the <Unknowns>.
In the beginning, a certain country was trying to assert its dominance over others by using newly developed weapons, but as the conflict became more heated, the <Unknowns> randomly appeared and began their era of destruction. In the end, only after that very country suffered heavy losses in their military facilities were all the countries able to band together and fight. It was only natural, though, as the absurdity of having aliens attack didn't exactly propel the countries to make good decisions. Humanity had no choice but to accept their new fate— they were forced to see that there were enemies that had appeared, enemies set to destroy them.
As such, without so much a declaration of war, humanity began their inevitable fight against the <Unknowns>. Soon, with all the fighting going on, a plan to put all non-combatants underground and into cold sleeps was developed. Cold sleep, a technology developed five years ago, was a cheap and effective way of preserving the cells while rendering the humans unconscious for long periods of time. It was effective in the sense that it kept everyone safe and without much need for maintenance, so supplies that were originally going to be used for these people could be sent to the combatants instead. Despite that, going into a cold sleep was scary in itself, and there was no guarantee that it would work against the <Unknowns>. The technology to safely wake them up without any damage was naturally developed as well. However, no one, especially those who were set to enter the cold sleep, expected to use this technology so soon.
The two elementary schoolers continued to sit as they said their final farewells. They understood that entering cold sleeps was necessary for the sake of humanity having a future, so they had no choice but to do it. Today was their last day, and that's why they snuck out of their respective emergency shelters to come meet with each other.
"Tomorrow, huh…" said Hime.
Hotaru frowned. "We've got no choice… right now, we're completely useless in battle, right?"
"I know," said Hime, dejected. "But why am I the only one in a different shelter? I mean, you and Mary are in the same unit…"
There was no possible way to house all the children into one shelter, so they had to be divided into different ones. Unfortunately, Hime was more concerned about being separated than she was about going into the cold sleep. After all, if Hotaru's shelter was attacked by the <Unknowns>, there would be no more meeting her ever again…
"I'm really scared if you aren't by my side," said Hime softly.
"It'll be okay. You're strong, you know?"
"I'm really not," said Hime, her voice shaking. A single tear ran down her eye. "I need you with me, Hotaru…"
She quickly wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Hime was the older one, but she had always been like this.

“We’ll be okay.” Hotaru strengthened her grip on Hime’s hand and used her other hand to turn Hime’s head a bit until they were face to face. “I think… No, I’m sure we’ll meet again. The adults will fight off the <Unknowns> for us, okay?”
“R-Really?”
“Really. Have I ever lied to you, Hime?” said Hotaru without an ounce of hesitation.
Hime shook her head, and Hotaru did a big smile.
“Once the war is over,” continued Hotaru. “Let’s meet here again!”
“Okay… it’s a promise?”
“I promise,” said Hotaru, raising her pinky to Hime.
Hime nodded slightly in response before completing the pinky swear with Hotaru.

Chapter 1: Princess of the Bladed City

"WHAT WAS THAT JUST NOW? HOW'D YOU READ MY ATTACK?"
"YOU'RE PRETTY STRONG... UMM...BY THE WAY, I'VE NEVER HEARD YOUR NAME, HAVE I?

AKIRA
SHINOMIYA



The boy looked up to see that the sky had suddenly turned quite ugly. He was with two others, and around them stood over fifty grotesque creatures. The creatures were massive; they must have been almost three meters tall. Their arms were big as well, but in contrast, their legs and waists were thin and scrawny. Their skin had some sort of metallic-reddish color, clearly made of some unknown substance, and their heads looked like they had been drawn on by abstract artists experimenting with new designs. Shape-wise they weren't too different from humans, but their deformed body shapes and peculiar figures certainly made them look more like cartoon characters. They were weird… weird enough that it only took one glance to know that they did not come from this planet.

These things were unknown entities that had suddenly appeared around twenty-nine years ago. They were, of course, the <Unknowns>, the ones that caused the very first calamity in this world.

"What the hell! Who the hell led us here? Look at this shit!"

"Shut up! You came here to rack up points in the first place, didn't you?"

"Stop, you guys!" screamed a girl as she tried to calm the boys. "This isn't the time to be arguing!"

The boys gritted their teeth and turned their attention back to the <Unknowns>. The hatred in their eyes may have been intense, but naturally, the <Unknowns> did not back down. Instead, they gave off a screeching sound from somewhere in their bodies and slowly closed crept forward bit by bit. That jarring screech was said to be their battle cry, a cry they did when they all received an order. In this case, perhaps they had just decided on how to kill the students. Hearing the screech, the boys couldn't control their trembling, so they just gripped their weapons even tighter.

Originally, this situation should have never occurred in the first place. They were students that lived in Kanagawa, the only city that defended the coast. However, they were not acting on orders from the higher-ups, but rather, they were acting alone.

Speaking of which, it wasn't like they were looking for a fight to the death in the first place. They certainly weren't looking to fight the main armies of the <Unknowns> that came out of the gate in Tokyo Bay. Instead, they were trying to pick off some stragglers around the coast for some easy points to raise their school ranks.

Today's little hunt should have already been over. They only spotted out five ogre class <Unknowns> at first, which they would have taken down relatively easily since they themselves had ten people in their unit. However, before they noticed it, seven of their ten members had been captured, and they were suddenly surrounded by ten times the <Unknowns> they initially saw. They weren't completely sure, but they had probably walked straight into a trap.

The <Unknowns> continued to advance as they screeched even more. It was almost as if they were laughing at the remaining three students.

Waving his weapon around, one of the boys screamed out, “Don’t fuck with me you damn monsters!” His weapon was pretty much a mace— it had a long handle with a piece of metal on the end.
He focused his mind on the back of his neck. Once he did, power seemed to flow throughout his entire body, and once again he took another look at the <Unknowns> creeping before him. He then kicked the ground and sprung towards them, brandishing his mace out in front. Light soon emitted from the tip of the mace as he thrusted it into the shoulder of an <Unknown>, who seemed to scream out in pain.
“How’s that, you— ” his voice trailed off. From both sides, more <Unknowns> were closing in on him fast.
“Watch out!” the girl shouted out, pushing the boy away from the <Unknowns>. The <Unknowns> released some sort of thick substance from their hands that wrapped around her entire body. For a while she could struggle a bit in it, but soon she was completely unable to move, almost like she had been trapped in a cocoon.
“This fuck…” The boy stood up and raised his weapon once again. But, the <Unknowns> used that same thick substance on the handle of his mace and pulled it away from his hands, leaving him speechless and weaponless. Looking at his inevitable death, he did nothing more but tremble and fall to his knees.
It was at that moment, however, that everything changed. A flash of light suddenly appeared in front of him, and in just a split second, one of the <Unknowns> near him was split cleanly into two pieces.
No, on second look, it wasn’t just one. The entire fifty <Unknowns> that had surrounded them were all cut into two. Every single one of them was killed in an instant, and before the boy could even blink, a mountain of their corpses had piled up before him.
He could do nothing else but stare in amazement.
—
Near the coast, on a watchtower far away from the battlefield, Akira Shinomiya confirmed all the kill counts. He took the specialized katana he was holding and flipped it over. In a moment, his image was reflected onto the blade.
Apart from the time he spent in the cold sleep, he was about seventeen years old. However, to many, he did look a bit older, maybe because he looked and felt somewhat dangerous. His glaring, sharp eyes went accompanied by his tight lips, but they were both covered by his relatively ungroomed front bangs. Honestly though, his look was reminiscent to a demon or something peeking out from behind some trees in the forest. If his bangs were trees, that is.
“Well done, Shino.”
Shino’s ears perked up a bit upon hearing that all too familiar voice. He took a look and noticed a single girl, Hotaru, standing behind him. She had hair that went up to her shoulders and a nice, friendly looking face. She too

was probably observing the battle from a distance, since she was holding a pair of binoculars.
“How was that, *teacher*? How’d that feel?” jokingly asked Hotaru.
Shino slightly exhaled and sheathed his sword. “Just the same as always,” he said with a dry, but powerful voice.
“Wow, that’s so cool! Someday I want to be in that position~”
Shino didn’t respond.
“Don’t make that scary face,” continued Hotaru, shrugging. “It’s a compliment, you know?”
He knew. It wasn’t like he meant to make a scary face, so he tried to loosen his face a bit with his hand and started to walk out.
“Ah, you’re heading home already?”
“My work here is done. There’s no more need for me to be here. Also— ” his voice was cut off by Hotaru nodding and going, “Ah, I see.”
“By the way, Kanaya called,” said Hotaru. “We gotta head back. Perhaps more missions?”
“Probably,” said Shino as he looked out to the left. The tower they were on was built for the sole purpose of observing the <Unknowns>, especially those that came out of the gate. From where they were at, they were able to see almost everything around them.
Even though they could see everything, the view was certainly not pretty. The area around them was disastrous, since it only consisted of the wreckage and ruins caused by the <Unknowns>. There were also a few large buildings and railroad cars scattered around the area, but they definitely were not well maintained. The roads that ran across the area were not much better. They were fixed just enough to travel on, though no one really used them for the most part. The whole area was so bad that even if it were the set of an apocalyptic movie, the director would say that it looked too rough.
“There’s been barely any progress on the restoration…” said Shino, saying the first thing that came to mind as he looked around the area.
“It has been twenty-one years since the end of the war,” said Hotaru worryingly. “That’s a long time, but…”
“There’s not much we can do, though. We lack manpower, and even if we do our best to restore everything, the <Unknowns> will still come again.”
Hotaru sighed. “Hey… do you think Japan really won?”
Shino didn’t respond. Twenty-one years ago, every nation, including Japan, suffered heavy losses at the hands of the <Unknowns>. According to what they’ve been told, it took humanity eight years to drive off them off and secure their victory. That’s why all the non-combatants, like Shino back during that time, were awakened from their cold sleeps.
However, humans were unable to communicate with the <Unknowns>, much less make a peace treaty with them.
In a normal war between humans, no matter how grim it got, there always lied some compromise that could be agreed upon between the countries.

The leaders may say that a war must be fought for the greater good, but in reality, most of them were in it for the money they could make.
On the other hand, <Unknowns> were certainly not like that. Even though humans had fought them face to face on the battlefield, they could not understand a thing about them. That's why the humans just arbitrarily declared that the war was over based on the fact that the <Unknowns> weren't attacking as much as they were in the beginning.
In other words, the word "victory" was nothing but a farce. Humans were only "victors" in the sense that they hadn't been obliterated by the <Unknowns> yet.
Shino understood this quite well. Japan alone had over 32 million casualties, almost a quarter of their entire population. How was that a victory? The remaining survivors probably just called it a "victory" to put themselves at ease, even though it was very much an empty word.
"… They decided that we won," said Shino sternly. "Twenty-nine years ago, as foolish as the world may have been, people began to drive off the <Unknowns>. They succeeded, so right now we're just taking care of the remaining ones that hadn't been killed off yet. So…"
"I see, yeah, definitely…" nodded Hotaru.
Hotaru Rindou was a clever girl. She was clever enough to have her own opinions on the matter, but she didn't voice any of it. Perhaps she knew that there would be no point in discussing the topic any more.
So, without saying another word, the two descended down the tower.
—
It took the train about forty minutes to get back to the South Kanto Administration Bureau. As the name suggested, a temporary government was set up there to assume direct control over the South Kanto area. Its sole purpose was to manage Tokyo, Kanagawa, and Chiba so that they could defend the area from the gate in Tokyo Bay where most of the <Unknowns> had been appearing.
"… You guys are finally back," said Kanaya as Shino and Hotaru entered the room. He was a big guy, about fifty years old, and had on a pair of glasses. His face and body was scarred like no other, so much in fact that the scars alone could probably tell quite a few epics of battle. However, despite his rough appearances, he seemed quite intelligent, both through his behavior and his actions.
His full name was Hisahide Kanaya. Twenty-nine years ago, he took up arms and fought as the war was just beginning. He was the head of the 4th Materials Management Division, in charge of both Shino and Hotaru. That being said, their division really didn't do stuff within their own bureau or even other departments. Their main goal was to assist the students of the city, whether it be helping them solve issues or even just maintaining public order. They dealt a lot with the public, and as such, they didn't really work behind-the-scenes. That's why they weren't called anything special— they didn't want to stand out too much or seem too imposing on the students.

“Yeah,” replied Hotaru.
Shino spoke as well. “What’s the matter, boss?”
Kanaya nodded. “Take a look at this,” he said, taking out a single photo and placing it on the desk.
Shino grabbed the photo and said, “Let me see.” It was a picture of a sweet and innocent looking little girl. With having very pale hair and a slim neck, she seemed to be suffering from some sort of long-term illness. Despite looking so feeble like that, she wasn’t wearing any sort of hospital gown in the picture. No, in it she had on a pure white uniform with bright golden buttons sewed onto it. There was no doubt that her uniform belonged to the coastal defense city of Kanagawa.
“This girl is…” Shino raised his brow. To him, the girl looked quite familiar.
“You guys should recognize her name, at least,” interrupted Kanaya. “She’s Maihime Tenkawa, Kanagawa’s number one.”
“I knew it,” nodded Shino.
The number of adults was kept at a minimum inside each of the defense cities. Of course, each city had its adult teachers, but that was about it. Over ninety percent of the city population was under eighteen years old. Even the political structure of the city was left to the students, and that girl stood at the top of that structure. She was the number one in her city.
“Hotaru? Something wrong?” said Shino abruptly as he glanced at Hotaru who was just standing beside him.
For some reason, Hotaru froze up after seeing the photograph. She didn’t even say a word for a while.
“… Huh? What?” she finally said.
“That’s my line, you know… You okay?”
Hotaru nodded. “Y-Yeah. I’m fine.”
Shino got quiet. There was something clearly up with Hotaru, and Shino was definitely curious about it, but it didn’t seem like she wanted to talk about it. So, he turned his attention back to Kanaya.
“So what about this Maihime Tenkawa?” he continued, despite having a good idea of the situation after thinking about it for a bit. He thought that perhaps she had been abusing her powers as the city head by doing some shady stuff. After all, this sort of thing wasn’t rare when dealing with student governed governments, especially in these types of cities. Sometimes people would inflate their egos so much that they would begin to do all sorts of things without a check for their powers. One of this division’s main duties was also investigating students in high-ranking governmental positions.
Cases like these usually revolved around people embezzling government funds, illegally selling military weaponry, or overusing their power in some way. In the past, there was a famous case of people creating underground gambling pits that were also used as a place to deal drugs.
From the picture alone, the girl didn’t seem like someone too shady, but obviously, looks didn’t determine everything. The previous war resulted in a

government that gave complete, uncontested power to the strongest people. It's entirely possible that she could have been corrupted by this power. To be fair though, Shino didn't recall her doing anything bad at all recently that warranted his attention. As long as she didn't do anything outrageous, a stern warning should suffice for now.

Should.

"First Ranked Akira Shinomiya and Second Ranked Hotaru Rindou, I order you both to…" Kanaya paused. "*Kill* Maihime Tenkawa, the head of Kanagawa."

Shino was shocked— he clearly did not expect this order. "Huh…" he muttered with his face looking more and more confused. Next to him, Hotaru nervously gulped.

"Kill? Like kill as in assassinate?" asked Shino.

"Exactly. We will have you kill her in any way, shape or form," said Kanaya as his eyebrows twitched. His expression stayed cold, however. "Of course, just make sure that her death can't be traced back to us and we're good."

Shino held his hand out hesitantly. "Wait, wait. Why?" he said, glaring at Kanaya. Shino was not the type of person to go against his orders, but as expected the circumstances were different this time around.

They were much different. The work they did covered a wide range of things and was certainly not pretty with all things considered. Despite that, everything they did was for the sake of the people, especially the boys and girls fighting on the front lines. But, this… this was an assassination. Even worse, it's an assassination of the city's top ranking student. Clearly, even from a defense standpoint, there would be dire consequences for doing such a thing, and it surely didn't take a genius to know that. Kanaya definitely had to be aware of the consequences of the order.

And that's why Shino was so suspicious. Even with all that, Kanaya still handed down the order to kill the number one protector of that city.

Kanaya simply shook his head. With a quiet, but heavy voice, he said, "Sorry, but these are special and classified orders from above. You guys don't have the authority to know why."

Kanaya was an adult veteran. He was different in that he didn't possess a <World>. If he had tried to fight anyone who did have a <World>, there was no doubt that he'd lose in a second. Shino knew this, but still objected in a way that didn't flaunt his power.

"But…"

"Is it your job to question me?" snapped Kanaya.

Shino sighed softly and turned silent. He straightened up his stance and saluted. "Akira Shinomiya, first rank, I shall carry out the order."

Kanaya was right… Shino's job was just to stay loyal and follow orders. After all, that order was probably the result of countless discussions by the higher ups. There was no room for opinions, and certainly no room for objections. Underlings that went against their orders would only result in the downfall of the organization.

“Ah… I as well,” said Hotaru as she too saluted.
Kanaya did a big nod. “Alright. You two will transfer to Kanagawa Academy and stay undercover as students. Your transfer paperwork has already been falsified and taken care of. All that’s left is your briefings. Well then, good luck.”
Shino and Hotaru both saluted one more time and promptly left the office.
“Ughhhh….” In Kanagawa’s city office, Tenkawa Maihime groaned, having just finished her training and academics. Usually around this time late in the afternoon she would be enjoying a cake at some coffee shop, but occasionally she had to stay late and finish up some work. Today she had to stamp through mountains of paperwork. These were documents written by her subordinates, so all she really had to do was stamp the documents she approved. But still, there were just so many of them… Stuff like budget, early graduation, and business requests were waiting to be stamped.
The work was so braindead that anyone would have fallen asleep doing it for long periods of time. Maihime was only halfway through the stack before she zoned out and just relied on her muscle memory to keep stamping. After what seemed like an eternity, she suddenly heard a knock at the door.
“Yeah….?” she said with a big yawn.
A familiar voice answered back. “It’s Yaegaki.”
“Oh, come on in.”
“Okay,” said Yaegaki, opening the door. She was a student in Kanagawa, just like Maihime, though she wore her uniform a bit more conservatively. She did seem like a shy girl with her glasses and her neatly trimmed hair that went up to her shoulders.
“What’s the matter, Aoi?” she paused. “Oh…”
The moment she looked up and saw Aoi Yaegaki, her face darkened. Aoi was holding more stacks of papers that needed to be approved. Maihime wasn’t even done with the stack on her desk…
“Wow… Even more?”
Aoi glanced downwards, depressed. “I’m sorry… but these things can’t progress without your approval,” she said apologetically.
“Oh…” Maihime felt bad hearing her apologize. She felt like she did something bad, so she just stretched out her arms and sighed. “Okay, got it. Just put it over there.”
“Sure thing,” nodded Aoi. “Actually, you know what, why don’t you take a break? I got something good for you here…”
“Something good?”
Maihime relaxed her body a bit and looked back up at Aoi, who brought out a white paper box. It wasn’t just any box, though… this box was from Maihime’s favorite coffee shop! She had ordered something to go.
“Wow! Are you serious?? Why?” she said as her eyes opened. She leaned forward onto the desk, and Aoi just stood there giggling.
“I heard you were looking forward to this, haha… This was something you wanted, right?”

Maihime nodded enthusiastically. “Of course it is! I love you so much, Aoi~”
Aoi’s face turned red as she smiled embarrassingly. “I’ll prepare some tea, too. Just wait there for a bit, okay?”
“Okay!” nodded Maihime. She sat up straight and blushed a little.
Aoi took one look at Maihime and smiled again before walking over to the shelf where the pot and cups were placed. Maihime continued to be in high spirits as she sat, almost like a dog who was told to stay. But, after a while, she suddenly stood up. She walked to another table in the room and started clearing some space on it. The table was technically supposed to be used for reception purposes, but most of the time it was used for tea parties.
“Ah! Sorry about that, Tenkawa.”
Maihime shook her head and said, “It’s all good!”
“Nice,” said Aoi. “You want a lot of milk in yours, right?”
“Wow, how’d you know?” said Maihime lightheartedly as she used a cloth to wipe the table. It was late in the day, but at least she could have her tea time today. “It’s melon cake! So pretty…”
Maihime took a closer look at the cake as she sat down on the sofa in front of the table— it was a shortcake with actual thin melon slices on top. Without hesitation, she took out a fork and pulled out a big piece of cake and popped it into her mouth. Instantly she not only tasted the sweetness of the cake, but also the slight acidity of the fruit. She couldn’t help but do a big grin as she squealed in delight.
Looking at her from the other side of the table, Aoi couldn’t help but grin as well.
“It’s delicious!” nodded Maihime. “Actually, more than that! It’s as good as the ones we had when we were little… I think.”
Well, it wasn’t like they could remember the taste that well, but there was no doubt that this cake would satisfy even the pickiest of eaters who lived before the war.
There really weren’t a lot of sweet treats in the years before Maihime entered the academy. As time went on, however, candies, cream, and other sweets started to be produced and sold. This, along with the introduction of some other luxury items, showed that the city was in fact on the path to becoming what it once was.
“It’s because the Chiba manufacturing plants have begun to introduce more and more fruits for us…” explained Aoi. “I heard from this month onwards they’re getting some new seeds from inland so they could start making some luxury fruits.”
“Wow… I can’t wait for that,” said Maihime as she took a big gulp of tea.
There were three cities by the coast that served as bases to protect the inland, and they each had their own roles to fulfill. Chiba handled all the food supply, Tokyo housed the central government, and Kanagawa manufactured most of the <World> materializing weapons. In Kanagawa’s case, the weapons that were difficult to manufacture were imported from inland. On the other hand, Chiba for the most part did not rely on them at

all. In fact, in recent years, it's been said that Chiba had been sending their extra food supply inland.
"Even so…" Maihime glanced at her desk. "Why's there so much more papers coming in recently? I feel it increases every year…"
"Well, that just shows how much the city is growing, right? There's been more and more shops popping up, and plus, there's new transfer students coming in, too."
Maihime's eyes widened. "Really? Transfer students?"
After the <Unknown's> main invasion, Maihime and most the other children were awakened from the cold sleep. Not all the children were awakened, though. The war left Japan in a barely habitable state, so there wasn't enough food and housing to accommodate everyone if they all woke up.
Generally, if cities needed more people for whatever reason, the children would be awoken one facility at a time and be assigned to the different cities. Because of that, in the beginning, most children were the same age, but as time went on, their ages started to vary bit by bit.
"Yes… Wasn't it written on one of the documents I had you check yesterday?" said Aoi.
Maihime had a blank look on her face. "Huh? Umm… Yeah, it was written on there… I-I think…"
"Huh…"
The room suddenly turned awkwardly silent as they both stopped talking. Maihime was even holding her breath— the silence was uncomfortable enough to make her sweat. Finally, she breathed out and looked down a bit.
"… I'm so sorry, I lied… I didn't see it," she said.
"I-It's okay! You don't have to apologize…" said Aoi, smiling bitterly. "It'd be great if you could look over each one, but I know there're just so much of them. How about for now I'll take a look at them, and just send you the ones that have some issues. I'll also send you the important ones too, of course, and put those on top of the stack, okay?"
Maihime bowed her head even lower and said, "… Thanks, thanks so much!"
"D-Don't worry about it!" said a flustered Aoi.
"But still, it's rare to see people getting awoken around this time…"
"I know, but it happens," said Aoi. "Sometimes the equipment can get a little wonky too, and people get awakened prematurely.
"I see…" nodded Maihime. She paused. "Transfer students, huh?" she said as she took another bite of cake.

—
“I’m Akira Shinomiya.” He bowed.
“… And I’m Hotaru Rindou. Please to meet you all.” She bowed as well.
The students started to clap. They were in a classroom, and the atmosphere seemed quite friendly and welcoming. It had been three days since they were given the order to assassinate Maihime, and within those three days they were able to successfully transfer to her class in Kanagawa.
Speaking of which, Kanagawa no longer referred to the Japanese prefecture Kanagawa. It was the year 2049, so Kanagawa was now a city rather than a prefecture, and it pretty much consisted of fortresses built in the old Yokohama city. Starting with the academy as its center, the city slowly expanded until it became what it was now— a “fortress” of over 10,000 people. The manufacturing facilities were built in the west, and those ran nonstop producing essential weapons for the cities. These facilities were known to be South Kanto’s weapon warehouses that stored all their firepower. Occasionally, they would get their supplies from Tokyo or Chiba by the trains that ran through the city.
Shino and Hotaru were assigned to the 2nd year, D class. In general, students in these cities weren’t separately randomly into classes. They were instead divided by their battle platoon. By doing so, students would not only be classmates in the classroom, but also fellow fighters in the field of battle.
All the students were in their teens, presumably because they were awakened around the same time. However, both Shino and Hotaru were clearly not in the same circumstances, so the class was undoubtedly interested in them. It wasn’t even the afternoon yet as Hotaru was swarmed by her new classmates.
“Wow, a transfer student.…”
“Hey, hey… Do you have a boyfriend?”
The chatter went on endlessly.
Hotaru could barely respond; she only managed to mutter a few words. Like Shino, she was thoroughly briefed on her fake history, and she did study it, but she was so overwhelmed by the flurry of questions that she couldn’t quite remember it clearly.
Shino, on the other hand, stayed unusually silent. There were plenty of students that were curious about him as well, but Shino unwillingly made himself quite unapproachable. He would return every glance his way with a look of his own, and that somehow made all the students not want to come near him.
“Yo, transfer,” said a random boy. “Don’t give that look… No one’s gonna come your way, see?”
Shino stayed quiet. He wasn’t really trying to stare anybody down, but maybe it just seemed that way to the others. “I’ll try not to do that,” he finally said after a pause.
The boy continued. “Hah. Well, you’ll get it eventually… I’m Sugiishi, by the way, welcome to Kanagawa. Let’s fight together under Hime-sama, okay?”

“Hime-sama?” said Shino with a blank look.
“Huh? Ah, sorry, she’s our top fighter and representative, Maihime Tenkawa. Hime-sama’s somewhat of a nickname, I guess.”
“… I see.”
“As the head she’s the face of our city, right?” Sugiishi continued. “You know, for me, I’m so, so glad I got assigned to Kanagawa. I can’t imagine what it’d be like if I got placed with those cocky asses in Tokyo or those hillbillies in Chiba. So don’t you dare lose to those people, okay?”
“Oh, so it’s a competition, huh?”
From an outsider’s perspective, Tokyo and Chiba should share the same will of protecting the country. On second thought, however, it wasn’t rare to have disagreements within the military, especially among the air force, navy, and infantry units. Perhaps this was necessary to keep a good rivalry going so that everyone would always strive to do more.
“Yeah, exactly. In terms of individual achievements, Hime-sama is usually number one in all of Kanto, so don’t let her down, heh. She really is on a whole new level, though… Maybe once you fight her in some mock battles you’ll understand the full extent of her power,” said Sugiishi. He folded his arms together and nodded. “Plus she’s cute… Like, way cute. Her cuteness is on a whole new level, too… damn she’s awesome!”
Shino was speechless. He just stared in silence as the school bell rang, so the students went back to their seats. Sugiishi lightly waved goodbye and went back to his as well.
Kanagawa wasn’t just a place where soldiers fought the <Unknowns>. It was also a place where students could learn and grow as people. Other than the obvious military training, the school followed a curriculum that a normal school might have had before the war.
Someone opened the classroom door, rattling it. Surely it must have been the teacher, but the unexpected reaction from the class indicated otherwise. There was even somewhat of a commotion.
Shino turned and saw what was going on. The one who entered wasn’t the teacher… it was a little girl wearing a uniform with a large coat wrapped around her. Her lightly colored hair was tied into two pigtails, and her even lighter skin looked as pure as could be. She was small and didn’t look fit for battle, but her eyes reflected upon her unyielding inner spirit.
This girl could have only been one person. Yes, she was Maihime Tenkawa.
“H-Hime-sama?” a student blurted out.
Another did the same, “Woah, what are you doing here?”
The students were livid to see her, and their expressions sure showed it. The classroom started to get noisier and noisier, so Maihime clapped a few times to calm the students down.
“Alright everyone, calm down. Today’s first period is aura management, right?” she said as she put her arms on her hips triumphantly. “So, I’m here as a special guest lecturer!”

That just seemed to pump the students even more though, as more and more started to cheer out:
“Hime-sama? Wow, that’s actually so awesome!”
“Holy! Isn’t this like super rare?”
Once again, the classroom was in disarray. Generally, it’s the teacher’s job to teach the classes, but things like aura management and weapon usage required students to materialize their <Worlds>, so the adults who didn’t possess them couldn’t possibly teach such things. That’s why these topics were left to the high ranking students to teach. Still, it was extremely rare to have the city head personally come teach these classes, so it was only natural that the students were this surprised.
Even with that in mind, Maihime’s popularity was incredible. It was as if she was an idol meeting her fans.
Shino just stared quietly at her within all the commotion. There was no way he could have imagined that he’d be meeting her so soon. Of course, he wasn’t really planning to do anything special yet, but this did present a good opportunity to see what she was like.
Maihime took a good look around the room. “I heard this class had some transfer students, so I got a little interested, heh…” she said, still looking around. “Where they at?”
Shino silently raised his hand a little bit.
Maihime saw that and smiled. “It’s you, huh? I’m Maihime Tenkawa, nice to meet you! Let’s work hard together, okay?”
“Sure,” replied Shino awkwardly as he bowed. With his head down, he took a quick glance at Hotaru, but for some reason, she was trying really hard to hide herself and not show her face. It was always wise to not let the target notice you too much, though in this case, it did look a little strange. She probably stood out even more like that.
Luckily, Maihime didn’t seem to notice. “The fact that you’re a transfer means you just got out of the sleep, right?” she said, opening her textbook. “How much do you know about ?”
“Just the basics,” he promptly said.
<Worlds> weren’t something one could understand just by looking at the word, but Shino already knew what they were.
“Everyone sees different <Worlds> within their heads,” he started to explain. “Some people see <Worlds> where it’s natural to walk on air. Some have <Worlds> where things melt upon being touched. And for some <Worlds>, it’s even possible to talk to other living things.”
Upon hearing Shino’s explanation, Maihime nodded satisfactory and said, “Yes, indeed. And when we make the <Worlds> we see within our heads a reality, that’s when the magic happens,” she added on.
Maihime took a peek at the textbook and continued. “Umm… one theory is that the <Worlds> we see were from the dreams we saw in our cold sleeps… huh…” she paused. “Oh, so it was like that, wow!” She was quite surprised.

The students laughed awkwardly. “Hime-sama, don’t tell me you didn’t know that?” one of them asked.
“Don’t tell the teacher about this, okay?” she said, raising a finger up to her lip. She looked back down at the textbook. “Ah, I see… but if our bodies were frozen completely by the cold sleep, how were we able to dream? Our bodies shouldn’t have been functional, right?”
“Maybe we had a dream right before we were completely frozen,” shouted out a student. “So we just stayed in that dream state until we were awakened?”
“Ah!”
“If that was the case then, I would have loved a dream where I was with my cute sister!” joked another student. The boys laughed, but the girls looked completely disgusted.
Maihime smiled and then cleared her throat. Her face got a bit more serious as she looked at Shino and said, “Well, if you know that much about <Worlds>, you’ve used your power before, right?”
“Yeah, many times,” said Shino.
“Excellent, excellent. The first usage is always the hardest, so if you’ve done that, then you’re all set. Oh, quick tip… if you are focusing on using your <World>, focus your mind on the back of your neck,” she said as she turned around and pointed to it. “It’s much easier to visualize the image that way.”
After she moved her hair out of the way, she showed everyone her barcode mark. It was a weird mark, but she definitely wasn’t the only one to have it. Everyone, including Shino and Hotaru, had the same mark imprinted on the back of their necks. According to the higher ups, these were codes that helped the students materialize their <Worlds> into reality. If they weren’t there, it would be incredibly hard, almost impossible, to use any powers at all. That’s why the students were trained to be careful not to let them get damaged, as they wouldn’t want to find themselves powerless on the battlefield.
“Alright, so let’s work on utilizing that code today… Hmm, how do you say this… When you focus on your aura, you feel a bit fuzzy inside, right?” continued Maihime. “Now before you let that fuzzy feeling spread, you kind of go *pew pew pew*, and with that I feel you can smoothly bring out your <World>.”
Maihime was doing all sorts of weird motions during her explanation, so the students were already having a hard time following her. Despite that, it was extremely rare for Maihime to come teach anything, so the students listened intently and tried to absorb everything she was saying.
Shino, however, didn’t pay much attention. He pulled out his tablet from under his desk and started to focus on that instead.
“…Hotaru, got a moment?” said Shino, just as first period ended. Maihime had just left the classroom, so the students were feeling a bit down.

“Ah, Shino,” replied Hotaru. She turned to a group of students who had gathered around her. “Umm… sorry everyone, excuse me for a bit,” she said as she did a slight bow.
They both left the classroom. As they did, some students could be heard saying, “I knew it, so they were together…” in a somewhat disappointing voice, but they paid no attention to it at all. They continued to walk down the hall until they stopped in a place where no one could hear them.
“Sorry, I know you were busy…”
“No, not at all,” said Hotaru, dropping her tone a bit. “Actually, you saved me a bit, I think… So, you wanted to talk about Maihime Tenkawa, right?”
Shino raised his eyebrows as they twitched a bit. For some reason, Hotaru felt a bit weird saying Maihime’s name… She had the same feeling back during the mission briefing as well. It was certainly strange.
“Shino?” said Hotaru after he failed to respond.
“… Ahh, yes, that’s right,” he said, nodding. “I looked into her a bit, but there were a lot of points of interest. First, her incumbency…”
“Incumbency… You mean how long she’s been as the city head, right? How long has that been?”
“Ten years…”
Hotaru’s eyes widened. “Huh…?”
That just wasn’t possible. A normal term for a city head was one, maybe two years. Three years was already considered quite long.
“Ten years… Let’s say that Maihime Tenkawa was physically about seventeen years old… That means she’s been fighting since she was seven?!??”
Shino nodded and said, “I mean, that’s what it implies…”
The city itself was managed by a supervising officer from the administration bureau and students selected by their test scores. The city head, however, was simply decided by whoever had the best battle results, so most were usually sophomores or juniors. With these two combined, the city government kind of consisted of a head and a bureaucracy.
The actual city itself consisted of students ranging from elementary to high schoolers. In general, only the high schoolers and some of the top middle schoolers participated in the real battles. Anyone below that focused on training so they too could fight one day. Of course, that meant that if the two were to believe the data, Maihime had been on the battlefield since she was seven years old. She also had to outrank all the middle and high schoolers as a seven-year-old in order to become the head.
“W-What kind of <World> did she see??” said Hotaru, trembling. It was an expected reaction. All the students had varying <Worlds>, but for a seven-year-old to become the strongest person in the city… It was a power that even Shino couldn’t possibly imagine.
“Speaking of which, if it’s been ten years, then shouldn’t she be in…”

“Yeah… She’s been at the top of so long now, so I’m sure she could go inland anytime,” replied Shino. “Apparently the Administration Bureau had been requesting her to go as well.”
Students sent to the defense cities were able to transfer inland after graduation. Because of that, the system did feel a little backwards. After all, the younger, less-experienced, students were sent to fight in the front lines, while the older, battle-hardened, students were sent to the peaceful inland. Well, it probably meant that the higher-ups *really* wanted to be safe with all that protection…
Anyways, when the students graduated, they were assigned to different places depending on their battle results. In addition, the city heads, or actually anyone with outstanding records, were able to graduate early. In fact, most of the previous elite fighters applied for early graduation the moment they hit the top ranks.
Shino continued, “But, while she did have amazing results, she refused their request to go inland and continued to fight in the front lines.”
“W-Why would she do that?”
“Who knows… Maybe she’s gone battle crazy, or perhaps she has a reason for not going inland… Wait, maybe…” Shino paused. “Maybe she has some other reason.”
Hotaru gulped nervously. “Another reason…”
“Just refusing orders from the administration isn’t enough to warrant a death sentence. I can’t help but think that perhaps her reason staying in the front lines has something to do with why the higher-ups want her killed.”
“L-Like what?” Hotaru was visibly even more nervous, as now sweat was dripping down her face.
Shino rubbed his chin a bit, thinking. “… Maybe she has some sort of coup d’état plan going on or something.”
“What the—? Really?” said Hotaru.
“Calm down, it’s only just a guess,” said Shino. “But, if she didn’t have a plan like that, we wouldn’t have gotten the orders to kill her.”
Hotaru’s face stiffened up as she nodded. It seemed she finally realized the gravity of the situation.
“In any case,” continued Shino, “the first thing we need is more information. Maihime Tenkawa… this city… we just need to know more about everything.”
“Agreed… but how are we gonna do that?”
“I’ve got an idea. Let’s talk more about it after class, okay?”
“Oh… Uhh, sure,” said Hotaru, just as the second period bell rang. To the students in this academy, academics were just as important as training. The two didn’t want to give off bad impressions by being late, especially since they were new.
“Let’s go,” said Shino as he headed toward the classroom. Hotaru nodded and followed right behind him.
—

Classes were finally done for the day, and Shino had gone to visit Hotaru in her room.He didn't visit her alone… He had on his shoulder a young female student with a school bag covering her head and packing tape wrapped around her arms and legs.
"So that's that. I'll leave it up to you, Hotaru." he said. The girl squirmed around as if to react to what he just said. Her muffled voice could be heard underneath the bag.
Hotaru took one look at that and smiled awkwardly. "Umm, Shino. Who's that girl?"
"Ah, her? She was walking alone on a nearby street, so I thought perfect! and brought her here."
"Perfect you say…"
"Don't worry. I made sure no one saw me do it."
"That's not what I meant…" said Hotaru, still baffled at the situation. In any case, there was no way she could leave them like that in front of her door, so she invited them to come in. "But okay… just come in first," she said.
The little girl squirmed even harder and tried to cry out, but Shino ignored her and entered the room.
All the students that lived in the city did so in the dorms. The dorms themselves were scattered around the city, and the students were allowed to move to any vacant place. Despite being called dorms, they were more like apartments.
Hotaru had just settled, so the only visible things in the room were some basic furniture. Shino placed the still squirming girl onto a chair upon walking in and tied her to it. It was only after that did he remove the bag over her head. He peeled off the tape on her mouth as well.
"Pwaah!" shouted the girl. She looked like she was about to cry. "Why are you guys doing this? What do you want from me?"
Shino ignored her once again and turned towards Hotaru. "Hotaru," he said.
"Yeah, yeah. But not too far, okay?" said Hotaru, sighing, as she rolled up her sleeves. She revealed an intricately designed metal hand plate on her arm. It was a specialized device that helped Hotaru bring her <World> out into reality so she could use its powers.

The little girl froze up in fear when she saw it. “W-What is that?!? What— ”
“Shino, how long has it been since you’ve captured her?”
“I think it’s been two, three minutes.”
“Ah, then ten minutes should be fine, right?”
“Yeah, there should be no problem with that,” said Shino.
Hotaru slowly touched the girl’s forehead. With her hand like that, Hotaru closed her eyes to concentrate. The girl tried to yell out, but her cries were soon cut off as she lost consciousness. They stayed like this for ten minutes until Hotaru finally let go of her forehead.
“Yeah, this should be fine,” said Hotaru.
“Okay,” said Shino. He took off the tape wrapped around the girl’s arms and legs and released her completely.
The girl soon groggily woke up and opened her eyes. “A-Ah! I feel asleep? Sorry, Shinomiya and Rindou!” she said, being unusually friendly. Her attitude did a complete 180— it was almost as if they had been friends for a really long time.
This was after all, Hotaru’s <World>. The <World> she saw was a world where she could be friends with anyone. It was a power that allowed her to quickly connect with others, but more importantly, it gave her the ability to gather information effectively during infiltration missions.
“It’s all good,” said Shino. “More importantly, I got some things to ask you. It’s about Kanagawa’s number one fighter, Maihime Tenkawa.”
“Tenkawa, you say?” she said with a blank look on her face.
“Yeah,” said Shino, as he followed up with the questions he had in mind.
The girl was confused, but she tried to tell everything she knew to her “friend” Shino. “Tenkawa, huh? She is doing a special mock battle tomorrow, actually.”
“A special mock battle?”
She nodded and said, “Yeah, once a month she holds a mock battle where she fights multiple people. Of course, it’s just like a normal mock battle, so the specialized <World> weapons have their powers limited. Apparently, she said that if you defeat her, she’ll give you the position of city head.”
“What?”
“Well, of course,” she continued, “no one in this world can match Tenkawa, so… But, if you show off some of your strength in that battle, I think you’ll leave a good impression. She does like strong fighters, you know.”
The girl smiled. It seemed like she had brought out her own personal feelings about Maihime once she started to talk about her so thoroughly,
“… I see,” said Shino. “So how does one participate in this? Also, normally how many people challenge her?”
“You just need one of those application papers that anyone could fill it out. The number varies obviously, but I’d say maybe around thirty people.”
“Ah. Then— ”
“Shino,” interrupted Hotaru. “Ten minutes is almost up.”

“Oh, is it time already?” said Shino. He turned to the girl. “… Well then, you have my thanks… I learned a lot.”
“Oh, no problem at all!” she replied. “Is this all you need?”
Hotaru smiled. “Yeah, thanks. I’ll show you the door,” she said as she gently led her out of the room. Shino followed close behind.
Just as they exited the room, Hotaru waved and said, “Well then, see you next time, okay?”
“Definitely! Bye bye!” she said bowing a bit. She turned around and started to walk away.
But suddenly, Hotaru went up, touched her shoulder, and whispered, “Release.”
The girl stopped immediately and started to shake a bit. Hotaru let go of her shoulder and nonchalantly walked away.
After a few moments of frantically looking around, she finally said, “Huh? W-What was I doing?” She once again had a blank look on her face. “What am I doing here anyway?” she said, bewildered, and started to walked away.
When Hotaru did her release, the girl no longer had any memories of when she was “friends” with Hotaru. Strictly speaking, she couldn’t even remember what she did for the past ten minutes: three minutes of being caught and seven minutes of conversation. This way, there was no way for anyone to find out that the two were secretly gathering information. It was a completely foolproof method.
Shino put his hand on his chin, thinking. “Special mock battles, huh?” he said, looking at the girl walking away. “I guess… I gotta go for it, yeah?”
“Really? You’re actually thinking of participating?” Hotaru said with a slight tint of nervousness.
“Yeah… what’d you think?”
“… I don’t think you should do it. Our mission is to kill her, so there’s no need to get her attention, right? We don’t need to show ourselves. And also, if it’s your <World>…”
“But that’s exactly why. She said there’s around thirty people in battle, right? That’s exactly what I need. If there’s some sort of ‘accident’ in the midst of battle, then there’s no way anyone could find out it was me that did it.”
Hotaru stood quiet for a bit. “Just… please don’t stand out too much.”
He nodded in response.
The next day, a large group of people gathered around the training grounds. They were packed so tightly together that it almost looked like they were in some sort of festival, as there were even food stands that were also set up around the area. A banner hung on the surrounding walls that read, “36th Tenkawa Cup.” The whole event was quite grand for just a mock battle, but school was probably out, and it seemed events like these didn’t come around often.
Shino stood silently with his arms crossed in the waiting room. From what he could see, there were thirty-two other people in the room with him with

about a fifty-fifty split on boys and girls. Everyone had chosen their own special weapon and were just waiting for the battle to begin.
"… Hey, aren't you Shinomiya?" he suddenly heard. He turned and saw a boy holding some sort of club in his hand walk up to him. It was Sugiishi, someone Shino had talked to before in class.
"Sugiishi?"
"Yup. Honestly, challenging Hime-sama straight off the bat… you've got guts."
"Well," said Shino. "I wanted to test my own power."
Sugiishi laughed lightheartedly and patted Shino on the back. "That's awesome! You're young and brave. Even if you get smacked around a few times, it's a good experience, right?"
Their conversation was interrupted as a student wearing a staff arm band walked into the room. "To all participants," the student shouted, "please get ready to move into the main area."
"Well, peace out man. Good luck in battle, rookie," said Sugiishi as he parted with the rest of the challengers. They all simultaneously pumped up their fists and moved out into the hall.
Shino waited for most of them to leave before following them out. He walked out through the hall and finally into the entrance of the main area. Once he did, he was suddenly overwhelmed by frightening loud cheers from the crowd. It was so loud, in fact, that the whole atmosphere almost made him feel like he was in an ancient Roman colosseum. The area was called the training grounds, but with a circular, enclosed field and about 1,000 spectators waiting to see the battle, it certainly did not feel one. The spectators were getting impatient, and their cheers were only getting wilder as they continued to wait.
"I see we got some good challengers, huh?" shouted a voice. With that, the audience shifted their attention away from Shino and the rest of the challengers onto a small figure standing on top of the arena walls.
Trying to focus on the figure, Shino squinted. It was a girl with long hair, and the overcoat on her back was fluttering with the wind. In her hand, she was holding a huge sword that was probably as tall as her.
This was, of course, Tenkawa Maihime. She stood majestically as she stared down the challengers.
The Crowd. Went. Wild. Screams were pouring out from all around, and many were shouting her name from the top of their lungs. The cheers were so loud that it made their cheers before seem nothing but a quiet whisper, and the whole arena shook with their loud voices.
Within the midst of the cheers, Maihime pumped her fist up and screamed out, shaking the arena even more.
Shino, on the other hand, quietly marveled at her ridiculous popularity. Obviously, taking down the most <Unknowns> would make anyone a hero to the city, but even so, the crowd's enthusiasm was miles beyond anything Shino had ever seen. It wasn't anything unexpected though, as she had

been dominant for around ten years now. It woudn't even be an exaggeration at this point to call her a legend. She had truly become something more than just a fighter… she had become a symbol of Kanagawa.
Maihime kicked off the top of the wall, interrupting his thoughts, and jumped elegantly toward the challengers. The wall itself was about twenty meters, and it was still another thirty meters to where the field was. Despite that, she did the jump so nonchalantly.
Shino's amazement didn't stop there. The students around him started to focus on channeling each of their auras so they could materialize their own <Worlds>. By doing so, their consciousness drifted closer to the <Worlds> they dreamed about, and their powers began to appear. Using these powers, jumping the distance that Maihime just did would probably be no big deal to them as well.
"AAhhh!" shouted Maihime. She lost her balance just as she landed, so her feet slipped and she face-planted straight into the ground. She stayed like that for a few moments as the crowd got uneasy.
"…U-Ughh…." she groaned. She raised her head a little bit— tears were flowing in her eyes and her nose was beet red. However, she quickly wiped her eyes with her sleeves, sniffed her nose a few times, and stood up. "… I-I'm fine!!" she shouted triumphantly.
"WWWWWWWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!!!"
> "Hime-sama, that was amazing!!!!"
> "You're so cool!!!!"
The crowd went crazy once again! Maihime gave out the peace sign, and the spectators started to applaud.
"… What is this…" This time, sweat dripped down Shino's forehead as he squinted again.
Maihime didn't pay any attention to Shino. "Sorry for making you guys wait," she said as she grabbed onto her large sword once again. She faced the students and said, "shall we begin?"
Funny enough, her nose was still red. Upon hearing that, however, the other students took up their weapons and got into their battle stances.
At the same time, the speakers around the arena lit up. "… And with that, the 36th special mock battle shall begin! Remember, fainting and of course surrendering counts as a loss! Now then, give this battle your all!"
The buzzer rang right after that announcement!
In an instant, the first group of about ten people, all wielding their swords, spears, and axes, made a straight dash for Maihime. Their speeds were so superhumanly fast that they reached her in a blink of an eye, even though the distance was a good thirty meters. Using those weapons, they were able to materialize their <Worlds>, and all of a sudden the air was filled with traces fire and electricity.

These people had the guts to jump at Maihime immediately, so they must have been quite confident in their skills. No matter how strong she was, Shino thought that there was no way she could take out these ten students without a scratch…
“YAHHHHHHHHHH!!” With a shout, Maihime swung her sword sideways. As a result, the students around her were all blown away like wind blowing away paper. A half circle was imprinted on the ground around her, and the students all went tumbling in different directions. A few were blown so far away that they even hit the wall around them.
“Woah….”
> “Holy…”
What resulted from that one blow was astonishing. About half of the group fainted, and the other half tried to get up, but soon collapsed on their knees. They stayed like that for a few moments before collapsing fully onto the ground. All ten were unable to continue battling any longer.
“What the…?” Shino’s voice trailed off. He was at a loss for words.
“NEXT!!! If you aren’t coming to me… I’m coming to YOU!” yelled Maihime. She gripped her sword with both hands and prepared to lunge out.
The students trembled, but they had resolve. “… Go! Don’t let her come to us!!”
“Go, go!!” yelled out another team. They charged Maihime before she had a chance to attack them.
However, the result was the same. Even though they were so pumped up, Maihime just blew them all away again.
“Wow… she’s amazing as always, huh?” Shino heard. He turned and saw Sugiishi standing next to him, club in hand. Sugiishi, with sweat dropping down his forehead, was also in awe staring at Maihime.
“Well then, we go too!!!” he finally yelled. The remaining ten students around him yelled out as well and charged her.
Tsk. Shino raised his eyebrows. He pushed his feet into the ground and grabbed his katana from around his waist. His plan was to mix in with the crowd and finish her off, but no way did he imagine Maihime to be this much of a monster. He noticed that once Sugiishi’s group was finished off, there would be no other students remaining.
“Consider yourself lucky, Sugiishi, for you are about to find merit in your actions,” he whispered, turning his focus to Maihime.
He took a small breath and used the back of his neck as a focus point. From that, he could feel the aura in his hands, legs, and eyes. His <World> was then materialized.
It allowed him to reach anything in his field of view by being able touch it. Of course, this also applied to his katana, and with it, he was able to cut anything he saw in an instant. It was literally a way to kill long distance through sight alone.
Shino continued to stare down Maihime. He turned his hips a bit and swung out his katana in one quick motion. *Tachi Blade Art One: <Utsuhami>.* A

bright flash of silver emanated from his swing and left a beautiful trace of light.
Shino knew that he swung at the perfect moment. He felt the blade go in for the certain kill. He had done this attack countless times before, so he knew when it succeeded.
Or so he thought.
In that moment, Maihime opened her eyes even wider and thrusted her sword straight up. *CLINK!* The two blades made direct contact, and that feeling radiated all the way back to Shino.
Maihime's expression slightly changed as she took a step back. "Whew…"
"Woah, what??" Shino stared in disbelief. In an instant, he felt his attack get blocked. What he threw out was no ordinary attack too… it was a shockwave that sliced anything in the blink of an eye. Knowing that, Shino thought that her block had to have been a fluke.
Or was it? He started to doubt himself as his instincts were telling him something completely different. Which was it? He didn't know. In any case, one thing was clear: Maihime was still standing strong.
Shino's attack created an opening for Sugiishi and his team to take advantage of, but even with that, it was no good. In less than thirty seconds, Sugiishi's whole team was wiped out just like the rest of the students.
Shino just stood there in a daze. Soon, with no one to fight her, Maihime turned her attention to him. She slowly walked towards him, dragging her sword along the way. Once she did, she looked up to him with her innocent eyes and smiled.
"… That's an interesting sword," she said. "That attack just now… That was yours, right?"
"… Nah." Shino didn't actually know why he lied. Perhaps he just did it just because he felt like it. It was a pointless lie, but he tried to act dumb regardless.
Maihime didn't doubt his words one bit. "Really? I was mistaken? Oh…" she said as she frantically looked around.
Her reaction was certainly unexpected. "Why don't you trust yourself a bit more?" said Shino, sweating.
"Huh? Ohh… so it *was* you!" She puffed her cheeks. Drawing her sword back, she took a step forward and got in position for a strike.
Just from her stance alone Shino instantly felt an incredible amount of pressure, but that didn't faze him as he held his sword in front with both hands. "Let's do this," he muttered.
Maihime lunged at him the moment she heard that and went up for an upward slash. As she got closer, Shino noticed that her body was quite small, her sword not overly gigantic, and her killing intent nonexistent. He went up to counter the strike— the moment their swords made contact, he pushed her sword off a bit so it would miss him as it swung down. Even with that brief encounter, he could feel Maihime's monstrous power. If he had

taken that swing head on, he definitely would have been blown away like the rest of the students, and probably be unable to fight any more.
Maihime was surprised that Shino actually defended himself from her attack. She let out a surprised gasp as she drew her sword back.
Tsk. Shino squinted a bit just as Maihime's next attack came, but Shino threw off that attack as well. She *again* attacked, and Shino *again* evaded. Attack. Evade. Attack. Evade. Attack. Evade. The cycle repeated itself many times.
Shino's <World> made it possible for him to keep countering Maihime's attacks. From his aura, his eyes strengthened, so he was able to see even the fastest of movements. In fact, it was almost as if he was seeing the world, with Maihime in it, in slow motion.
However, as the attacks went on, Shino's eyes kept twitching. Her attacks were slowly chipping away at his katana, and his hands also started to get weary. Even though her attacks weren't connecting at all, it was only a matter of time before Shino's defense gave out.
He knew this, so he tried to switch to the offense. Right before her next attack, Shino kicked up some dirt into her face, forcing her to close her eyes. He used this opening to draw his sword up and get her entire body inside his field of view.
He saw her completely: her head, neck, shoulders, arms, everything. All in all, there were thirty-two vital spots on her body that he was completely focused on. If he was able to see all thirty-two spots, he would be able to cut every single one. With a thunderous roar, he swung down his sword.
Tachi Blade Art 2: Senjin. From his sword, thirty-two simultaneous invisible strikes suddenly came at Maihime.
Just as they were about to hit her, Maihime countered with a yell of her own. She spun her body around rapidly, almost like a tornado, and countered *all* thirty-two attacks. *TINK TINK TINK*!!! The sounds of two metals clashing together came out from inside the tornado, and for each clash, sparks flew out in all directions.
Shino couldn't believe what he was seeing. "What…?" he said with his eyes wide open, staring at her. He was dumbfounded… She couldn't even see with the sand in her eyes, yet she sensed and successfully blocked every single one of those slashes that came from all around her.
Maihime stopped spinning and jumped a bit back. She rubbed her eyes until she was able to see clearly and pointed her sword at him. She may not have taken any damage herself from the attacks, but it seemed even she couldn't perfectly deflect them all. Parts of her uniform were ripped, and there was even a big hole in her outer coat.
Despite that, she looked unfazed as she lightly tapped her skin through the newly made holes in her uniform. She turned to look at Shino and enthusiastically said, "Amazing! Hey, hey hey…. What was that just now? How'd you do it?!?!" She waved her arms around like a little child.

Shino, however, wasn't so amused. To him, Maihime sounded a bit sarcastic saying that. "That's my line…" he said as he glared at her. "What was that just now? How'd you read my attack?"
"Umm… Not sure, I just did whatever, I think!" she said triumphantly.
Shino was speechless. For some reason, he started to sweat more as well.
"You're pretty strong…" continued Maihime. "Umm… by the way, I've never heard your name, have I?"
"Akira Shinomiya," he responded, still staring straight at her.
"Ah, so Shino, huh?" Interestingly enough, she gave the same nickname that Hotaru once gave to him. Perhaps they were alike in some way.
Shino didn't respond. Maihime made a huge grin and took a step forward.
"My turn then, Shino," she said, getting her sword in position.
Once again, Shino didn't say a word as he took up his own fighting stance. He wasn't trying to copy her, but somehow he knew that she wanted to finish the fight with her next attack. Still, no matter how much praise she sent his way, Shino knew that in the end, Maihime was certain of her own victory.
Bring it on, then. Shino knew all too well how much of a monster Maihime was, but there were still some tricks he had up his sleeve.
He sheathed his katana, grabbed the handle, and faced her with a low stance. Just from looking at his stance alone, it was clear that he too was ready for a head on strike. Maihime got so excited looking at him that her eyes were shaking with anticipation.
The distance between her sword and his katana was about ten meters. He started to zone out the crowd around him as he focused more and more on her. In fact, he was so focused that nothing could have broken his concentration.
A single drip of sweat rolled down his chin. It continued to drop, and drop, until it hit the ground.
That's when all hell broke loose. In that very instant, Maihime lunged at Shino at a frightening speed. Despite that, Shino's superhuman vision was able to read her movements, and while she was in midair, he started to grip his handle harder and harder… He was ready to do it.
BEEEEEEEEP! An alarm suddenly rang throughout the entire city. The two's battle was forcibly stopped by its loud shriek.
"Huh??"
Tsk. Shino lost focus and dropped his attack. The alarm continued to ring, and this time an announcement came on as well.
<Unknowns> have been detected off the gate in Tokyo Bay. Please go to your designated battle positions and prepare to engage. I repeat…
The city's atmosphere changed in a split second. The spectators, who moments earlier were cheering their hearts out, suddenly turned quiet and quickly moved out of the arena.

In the midst of everything, Maihime drooped her shoulders. “W-Wait…” she said disappointingly. “That’s some bad timing… Just as things were getting good…”
“Yeah, I guess.”
“Oh, wow!” she said, taking a good look around her. “It’s pretty bad timing for these people here too! The <Unknowns> are here, yet they’re all knocked out…”
Shino didn’t respond. Obviously, they were like that because of her, but Shino chose not to say such a thing.
“Okay then!” said Maihime with a big nod. “I’ll be right back. Shino, you rest here with everyone, okay? Today was so fun! If we ever get the chance to do it again, let’s do it!”
She then leaned her sword against her shoulder and took off. Using the power strengthened by her aura, she was able to easily jump onto the wall that surrounded the area.
“…ATTENTION!” she shouted, pointing her sword towards the ocean. Her voice echoed loudly off the walls and into the ears of the students. They too turned to the ocean.
“Looks like we got some visitors…” she continued. “Let’s give them a warm welcome, shall we? Those braindead things need to be taught a lesson, yeah?”
“YEAH!!!!!!”
In just a few sentences, Maihime managed to rally up the students, who before were completely scattered about.
“…Off to save the world we go then!” she finally said nonchalantly. She did a big leap off the wall towards the ocean, and the students soon followed suit.
Shino went to follow her as well. Once he left the arena, however, he randomly stopped and stared out into the ocean.
As he did, Hotaru ran up to him and shouted, “Shino!” From where she was coming from, it seemed she was one of the spectators. “You okay?”
“Y-Yeah… I’m fine,” he said without turning to look at her.
Hotaru breathed a sigh of relief. “You know at the end?” she continued. “If that alarm hadn’t gone off… you would have won, right?”
“… I don’t know,” said Shino after a brief pause.
“Really? Tenkawa Maihime is certainly strong… but you’re even stronger!”
Right as she said that, ominous silhouettes appeared on the ocean horizon. They were obviously the <Unknowns>, and from the looks of it, they were probably going to invade the city.
Probably.
A vertical flash of light suddenly appeared in the front lines and split not only the ocean in two, but also the group of <Unknowns> above it as well. After a few moments, the two were able to feel the shockwave that emanated from that very light. Shino couldn’t confirm it, but he knew… He

knew that the light that had just appeared and shook the earth itself was the result of Maihime getting serious.
Hotaru was speechless. She could only watch as she started to get more and more nervous.
It wasn’t long before the <Unknowns> had no choice but to retreat. It had only been ten minutes…

Chapter 2: Stalking

There were currently four students in Kanagawa's student council room, a room widely considered to be the most important room in the city. Their heights were different, but they all had the same student council officer medal pinned to their chest. These medals shined brightly under the light.
A girl spoke up first. "So, have you all heard about what happened yesterday in the special mock battle?" she said with slightly muffled, yet commanding voice.
The rest of the officers nodded in response. "Yes… I mean, we did just have a report on it," said one of them.
"Yeah, I guess so, huh…"
Another girl rattled on without a pause, "Why are you asking something so obvious can you please get to the real topic here I'm sure you didn't gather us here to just talk about world news right?"
Upon hearing her, a tall girl nodded.
"Then everyone should be aware of it, then," the first girl continued. "The student who fought Hime-sama…"
News of yesterday's battle had already spread to the student council. Maihime traded even blows with a mysterious student who up to that point had not been seen before. He was able to damage Maihime's uniform, and that already was no easy feat.
"What kind of person is he to be able to fight Hime-sama like that? And if he's that strong, why haven't we heard about him before?"
This time, another officer who had a mole below the left side of her lip chimed in. "Yeah… It'd be nice if he was just shy, but with his skills, he would have no problem getting real results on the battlefield."
"If that's the case, then just *who* is he?" said a girl with glasses.
The tall girl chimed in, "Well, what if he was a spy sent from another city?"
"It's possible. Hime-sama has by far the best individual achievements in all the cities, after all."
The final officer, a slim girl, was crouched on top of a chair. "But why would they send in their own student to harm Hime-sama in the first place it doesn't make sense," she said without pause.
"A-Aren't we overthinking this…?"
"I don't think so. It's no secret that the Tokyo and Chiba city heads *hate* her."
The four girls nodded simultaneously.

The slim girl started to speak again. “Well I would like to know more about this individual but more importantly…”
“Yeah,” nodded the tall girl. “The bigger issue now is that Hime-sama had been in a ridiculously good mood since yesterday. Of course, a happy Hime-sama makes me happy, but she’s been constantly saying stuff like, ‘I met a super strong person!’ and ‘I wonder if I can meet him again?’ so much that it really gives me a bad feeling.”
“Hmm, you’re right, she did say that, huh,” said the girl in glasses. Her eyes suddenly lit up. “Hey, you don’t think that maybe she… likes him…?”
“……”
The other three just stared back in silence. The girl in glasses stopped speaking in the face of their frightening gazes.
“… Anyways, let’s all be on the lookout. As the four divine pillars of Kanagawa, our mission is to protect her, after all.”
Two of the girls nodded in response, with the other one nodding slightly later.
“For the sake of Hime-sama!” they said in unison as they all fist pumped each other.
—
In a hidden room somewhere out there, Shino stated his conclusion very clearly:
“It’s impossible.”
“Really? Just like that?” said Hotaru, smiling bitterly while sweating a little bit. There wasn’t much she could do about it, and Shino’s head shake only strengthened that notion.
“I’ve tried *Utsuhami* on her three times after that mock battle.”
“H-How’d it go?”
“The first attack was repelled, the second was dodged, and the third she caught with her bare hands, all while doing her little grin.”
“Woah…” said Hotaru with a sullen face.
Shino seemed to want to make the same face as well. His <World> of being able to touch at any distance was the pride of the Administration Bureau’s 4th division, and it was said to be one of the strongest <Worlds> ever seen. In the past, some people had <Worlds> that directly countered his, making it ineffective. Some also used their wits and ingenuity to fight successfully against him as well. There certainly weren’t many, but these people did exist.
However, that girl was just on a whole new level— Shino had never seen anyone like her before. She fought using pure brute force with only her intuition to guide her. Fighting her, Shino had to spend all his energy just to avoid getting killed. Going for an offensive was the furthest thing from his mind.
How could he do it? The fight in the arena seemed more and more like an illusion with each passing day. He felt as though he had just made the perfect move in chess, but a hammer came swinging down on the board.

Shino shook his head. He couldn't get discouraged now, and right now he wasn't acting like his usual self. There was no way he could give up, even if he was sure that Maihime Tenkawa was not like any other fighter he had fought before.
He could understand why the Administration Bureau viewed her as a problem. She had the power and charisma to become one of the strongest leaders of all time. If she were to take this and lead a rebellion against the Bureau or even Japan, she would become a huge threat.
"T-Then, what should we do?" anxiously said Hotaru. She raised her brow. "We just return back empty handed?"
Shino shook his head and said, "We will fulfill the mission one way or another. Besides, if not us, no one from the Bureau would be capable of killing her, I think."
"Then what?!?!"
"Calm down. When I said it was impossible, I was referring to *right now* only."
"Huh?" said Hotaru as her eyes widened. "Right now you say… so you got some sort of plan?"
"Well… I'll go find one."
"You'll find one?" Hotaru was puzzled.
Shino nodded. He waved his arms around as to signify the room. "The first step to that… would be this room," he said.
The room they were in right now was a dorm that Shino had just rented. In fact, he used to have a different dorm, but he applied to move to this one after the mock battle. As a result, the two's secret meeting place had to be changed to this room.
"Uhh… Speaking of this room, why'd you change to it? Your previous dorm had fewer people, and I thought it was easier to stay low there, wasn't it?"
What Hotaru said was indeed correct. However, there had to be some reason he would choose this room over his last.
Shino casually strolled across his room, and with a single pull, he opened the curtains. Hotaru had to squint as the bright sunlight pierced into the room.
He pointed to something outside the window and said, "Take a look at this."
She blinked a few times and walked over to where he was. Her eyes widened as she looked outside. "Is that… the dorms? Wow, it's pretty big, huh…" she said.
"Exactly. It's a pretty big dorm building, but you see that room on the top floor? That's Maihime Tenkawa's room."
Hotaru's eyes were wide open now. "That's it?!?! Then, does that mean…"
"Maihime is still a human being, so she must have some sort of weakness. *Everything begins with observation,*" said Shino. He clutched his fist. "I'm going to study her completely, and the results I get will lead to some sort of way to defeat her."
For some reason, Hotaru just stared at him awkwardly after he said that.

“What is it?” he asked, looking at her.
“… Nothing… So in other words, you’re going to go peeking, huh?”
“It’s not peeking. It’s observing.”
Hotaru did not seem convinced, and her face showed it. “Sure…” she said sarcastically. “But if you’re ‘observing’ from here, you can’t really see things clearly, can you?”
“Well…” said Shino as he walked to the corner of the room and opened a box. Inside, a small telescope was neatly packed by some Styrofoam. He had bought this item yesterday from some store inside the city.
“Uhhh….”
“Don’t worry, I got something for you too. Unfortunately, they only had this left, though. They’re binoculars made for bird-watching.”
“No, no, that’s not what I meant,” said Hotaru, concerned about how things were progressing. She raised her hand up to her forehead, but that went largely unnoticed by Shino as he quickly set up the telescope.
He aimed the telescope at Maihime’s room, and gave Hotaru a thumbs up. But, she looked even more concerned. “… You aren’t peeking, right?”
“I am observing,” he stated very clearly and looked into the telescope. By pure coincidence, right as he did, Maihime walked into his field of view. She was wearing the same uniform as usual, but this time she wasn’t wearing her huge overcoat or gloves.
“There she is… It’s Maihime Tenkawa,” whispered Shino. He reached around for a chair while still looking intently through the telescope, though he couldn’t find one.
Instead, Hotaru brought him one and set it down next to him. He sat down, and continued to observe for a while.
Maihime unfastened the buttons on her uniform, took off her outer jacket, and threw it onto the bed. She then rolled up the sleeves on her inner shirt and started to stretch her back a little bit. Once she did that, she went to her desk near the window so she could use her laptop.
“… With this, I can get all possible intel on her,” said Shino.
Hotaru seemed a bit confused. “Umm… when you say ‘all possible intel,’ you mean intel just from observing from here?”
“Nope,” said Shino, as he raised his arm up and waved it around. “Have you forgotten about my <World>?”
Maihime started to view a file on her screen. Her shirt sleeves were rolled up, her top button was unfastened, and the tip of her loosened necktie was stuffed inside her front pocket.
“… Hmm, I guess it’s not here, huh?” she said as she finished scrolling all the way down. She couldn’t find the information she was looking for, so with a pout, she crossed her arms disappointingly and slumped back.
However, at that moment, she felt something touch her exposed forearms, making her yell out. Looking around, she bolted out of the chair and just stood there shaking her head. Of course, she didn’t see anything unusual, so she embraced herself for comfort.

“Uhh…. What was that…” she said, trembling. She looked at her forearms once again. What she felt wasn’t the wind blowing against it— it was something that felt much more concrete, like a person’s fingers.
She rubbed her arm nervously and said to herself, “I-It’s not a ghost, r-right…?”
At that very moment, someone knocked on her door.
“HOLY!” For a moment, she couldn’t breathe, but she quickly calmed herself down. She realized it was someone at the door, so she held her chest and said, “Yes?”
“… Sorry to interrupt you during your break, but it’s Yaegaki. Can I have a moment?”
Hearing such a familiar voice seemed to calm Maihime down a lot. “Ah, Aoi… go ahead,” she replied.
Aoi opened the door and walked in. Since she also lived in these dorms, if she needed anything from Maihime she would just knock on her door like this.
She looked a bit perplexed as she saw Maihime stand defensively in front of her desk. “Umm… were you in the middle of something?” she asked, noticing Maihime’s uneasiness.
“No, nothing like that,” said Maihime. “But something weird definitely happened just now…”
“Something weird?”
“Yeah… I felt like someone touched me, even though no one’s here…” she suddenly paused. Earlier she felt the invisible hand touch her arms and neck, but now that very hand was feeling around her thighs and butt.
“W-WOAAHHHHH?!” she shrieked as the invisible hand went up to her hips. It then slowly felt around her stomach and finally started to rub her breasts.
Maihime shrieked out once again.
“W-What is that?!?!?” shouted Aoi. Even though nothing was touching Maihime, she noticed that Maihime’s breasts were wiggling around uncontrollably. It was almost as if there was some sort of alien parasite beneath her shirt.
“AHH!!! Aoi!!! Get it off me!” she said in a panic.
“H-How??!!?”
Their screams echoed clearly across the room.
“… I see.”
Continuing to peak into the telescope, Shino moved both his hands boldly but sensitively enough to feel everything he needed to feel. Using his skill, *Utsuhami*, he was able to touch Maihime just by looking at her. However, she did look a bit blurry through the telescope, so Shino had no choice but to feel around her body.
“Umm… Shino, what are you doing?” said Hotaru.
“I’m touching her,” he responded without batting an eye. “… Now I’m going to get a feel of her breasts.”

Hotaru stayed silent for a few moments before speaking up. "… Aren't you just molesting her…?" she said, disgusted.
Shino was unfazed as he responded with, "I'm just doing my research."
"Well, I feel like touching a girl's breasts without her permission is kind of shady…"
"Isn't our assassination shady already?"
"… Yeah, I guess so. Sorry," said Hotaru. She was unexpectedly honest with the situation, and she bowed her head apologetically. "But, even if you say it's for research, what do you gain out of touching her breasts?"
"The breast itself is a lump of fat," explained Shino. "When people begin to develop more and more muscles, they start losing some fat, and as a result, their breasts become smaller. You'll notice this in a lot of female athletes, even though it is obviously differs by person."
"Ah… I see."
"But the thing is, how can Maihime Tenkawa's breasts be this soft?"
"Uhhh… How would I know?"
"I'm feeling it through her shirt, but if I had to guess, she has a D cup… around 80 centimeters."
Hotaru was surprised. "Woah really? She has those?" she said while looking at her own breasts. "How do you even know that anyway?"
"Everything begins with observation."
"That sounds deep, but you still haven't answered my question."
"Anyways," said Shino as he tried to get back on topic. "Her breasts still have a lot of fat, which means she probably doesn't have the athletic type body. Which means that her monster strength comes solely from her aura. If we can somehow get rid of that aura, then it may be possible to kill her."
"I see…" said Hotaru. Her face made it difficult to tell whether or not she really understood what Shino just said.
It was then that Maihime, still wiggling around uncontrollably, shut her window and closed the curtains. Shino was unable to feel her any more after her body disappeared from his line of sight.
"Damn…"
Maihime's faint silhouette could be seen through the curtain, and she looked to be in a hurry while she quickly dressed herself. Perhaps she wanted to leave the room for a bit after experiencing all the weird things Shino did to her.
"She's probably gonna go outside. Let's go."
Hotaru was baffled once again. "Huh? Go where?"
He didn't give a reply to her question, but instead, he shut the window and curtain the same way Maihime did earlier, put on some clothes, and quickly left the room.
—
A few minutes later, Shino and Hotaru were secretly tailing Maihime around some blocks in the city.
"Hey, Shino…" said Hotaru.

“What?”
“Umm… What are we doing?”
“We’re obviously tailing her,” he replied. He was taking pictures of Maihime with the digital camera he had brought out with him.
Hotaru’s face twitched as she watched Shino do his thing, but soon she said, “Hey… isn’t this just stalking?”
“It’s called tailing,” objected Shino. “I said it earlier, didn’t I? We’re going to research everything about Maihime Tenkawa. What I did in that room was but one part of the overall plan. Everything I do here is so we can carry out our mission.”
“I-I see,” she said, despite looking relatively unconvinced.
Shino, however, didn’t seem to care. He continued to creep behind Maihime while taking her picture every so often.
Maihime, in her usual outfit with her school uniform and big outercoat, nonchalantly walked around town. There were various shops set up on both sides of the well-maintained street. From where she was at, she could see a café, bread shop, and even some clothes and other miscellaneous shops lined up on the sidewalk. The Administration Bureau set up some shops of its own as well, but most of them dealt with management and other specialized fields managed by students well versed in those majors. Students needed the student council’s permission to set up the shops, and once those shops passed inspections, they would also get some money to help with the costs.
“Ah, Hime-sama! Are you on break today?”
“We got some new stuff that just came in, please try it out!”
“Hime-sama, come here too!”
The varying shopkeepers all noticed Maihime walking down the street, so they tried to get her attention. She was as popular as always.
“Oh? Which one, which one?” she said, rolling up her sleeves. She began to talk with the shopkeepers around her.
Shino was hiding in the shadows of a nearby building. He went up to take another picture, but he heard a shutter sound before he even pressed the camera button. With a dubious look, he turned towards the noise, and was shocked to see a little girl squatting next to him. She was holding the same type of camera as him, and she too was also taking pictures of Maihime.
“Woah?! W-Who is this,” he said, wondering when she came up next to him.
A moment later, Hotaru noticed the little girl as well and cried out in surprise, frightening her. Now trembling, she turned to look at the two. They clearly didn’t notice each other until now.
She was skinny, and her hair was braided into two long pigtails. Her eyes looked extremely gloomy with big bags under them. Those eyes, combined with her pale looking skin, made her look quite sickly. The uniform she had on indicated that she too was from Kanagawa Academy, but she wore a hoodie that covered most of it. Her hood was pulled all the way down to her eyes, almost as if she wanted to hide her face. For some reason, she was

also wearing a panda plush on her back. Even the panda itself seemed to have an unpleasant look on its face.
“When’d you get up here…”
In an instant, Shino and the girl locked eyes, but the girl quickly averted hers and quickly ripped off the panda from her back. From the looks of it, it seemed that some Velcro straps held the entire plush on her shoulder.
She looked at the panda directly in the eyes and said, “What is this why are you guys here why are you guys hiding here actually?”
“Huh?” Shino was dumbfounded by the girl’s odd behavior. “What are you doing here?”
“Why don’t you answer my question first before asking yours who are you guys what are your names?”
“… I’m Akira Shinomiya.”
“And I’m Hotaru Rindou.”
Hearing their names, the girl got closer to her panda and said, “I see my name is Zakuro Otonashi so what are you doing here Shinomiya this is my area you know.” She took a moment to look at Shino’s camera before hastily reverting her eyes back to the panda. “That camera in your hands you aren’t taking pictures of Hime-sama are you?”
“Hmm, this? Ah, this is…” he stopped midsentence. There was no way he was going to tell her that he was looking for a way to kill Maihime Tenkawa.
Zakuro eyed Shino suspiciously at his sudden silence. Or rather, Zakuro made her panda eye Shino suspiciously.
“You couldn’t be planning on taking some sneak pics of Hime-sama you two don’t seem to be part of the newspaper club but why are you doing this depending on your answer I may or may not take you down right now.”
Zakuro rattled on, but she did sound a little indifferent to the situation.
“Calm down,” said Shino, shaking his head. “I’m just doing this out of interest and curiosity, nothing else.”
Hotaru chimed in, “Though it’s just having a stalker-like mindset doing stalker-like activities,” but the two didn’t pay any attention to her.
“So that’s it huh” Zakuro said after a short pause. She nodded her head. “Then that’s okay I guess not a lot I can do about that.”
“Huh? So it’s all good now?” said Hotaru.
“Yeah I don’t see the harm if you two are just fans of Hime-sama I mean she is like an angel descending down on this depressing world after all so I can’t fault you two for being her fans.”
Hotaru smiled bitterly. “Y-Yeah… that’s exactly it,” she said, troubled.
Fortunately, Zakuro didn’t seem too suspicious.
“So Shinomiya how many pictures of Hime-sama did you take let me see please,” said Zakuro, reaching her hand out to Shino as she continued to stare at her panda.
“Err…” Shino handed her his camera. He didn’t like how the situation was getting a bit more complicated.

Zakuro took hold of the camera and began flipping through the images. Shino only started his investigation of Maihime today, so there weren't a lot of pictures stored in the camera. In fact, it only took Zakuro a minute or so to see all of them.
"Hmm…" she said, grinning.
"What?"
"You still got ways to go my friend," she said. From her uniform pocket, she took out a bunch of photos and handed them to Shino.
"What's this… woah!" said Shino. He was in shock the moment he saw the photos. They were also pictures of Maihime, but the quality on hers was on a whole new level. The photos were beautiful, vivid, and masterfully shot. She framed each shot to put maximum emphasis on Maihime's body, calculated the angle beautifully, and perfectly incorporated everything else around her. If she had a logo on the pictures, they could instantly be on the cover of any magazine.
"Incredible." Shino couldn't say anything but praise about the picture quality. Of course, in his mind, he was thinking about it in terms of his research.
"Hehe… heh…" Zakuro's started to blush a bit while trying to hide her grin. She was clearly happy that someone complimented her on her photography skills. "As fellow fans of Maihime I offer you good luck on your journey it may be long but stay true to your heart."
"Thanks, but how do you take pictures like that?"
"First of all learn how to take pictures without using any of the camera's features but the most important thing is your undying passion for whomever you want to take a picture of," she said. Like always, she was staring at her panda as she spoke, but this time she raised her head cautiously.
She noticed that Maihime was walking away, so she said, "I miscalculated I have to chase her excuse me sorry."
Without any emotion in her voice, she stuck the panda back onto herself , stood up straight, and was gone in an instant.
"…Wha—" Shino couldn't finish his sentence.
Hotaru was just as surprised. "S-She disappeared?" she said in astonishment.
The two began to look around until Hotaru said, "Hey Shino… Look!"
He turned and saw that Maihime was now quite a distance away from them. On a closer look, he noticed that Zakuro was hiding behind a billboard near her.
"Woah, she covered that distance in an instant?" said Shino with his hand over his mouth. That wasn't something any ordinary human could do. He didn't know the details, but that was definitely some sort of <World>.
"H-Hey, what do you think that was?" asked Hotaru.
"I don't know, but…"
"But?"
"Using that speed for stalking… what a sad little girl."

Hearing that, Hotaru just sneered at him without saying another word.
Two days later, Shino and Hotaru were walking down the road, having just finished their lectures and training. Hotaru was lingering slightly behind.
“Hey, where to today, Shino? More observing?”
“Hmm…” said Shino, glancing at her. “It’s certainly important to keep up the observations, but that alone isn’t enough. We have to get information from multiple angles. It’s tough though… and today is Tuesday too…”
“Tuesday? What does that have to do with anything?”
“Plenty. I can only do this Tuesday and Friday, you know, which makes it more important than tailing her.”
“Huh? What do you mean..?”
“You’ll see,” said Shino. He stopped and said, “Hey look, we’re here.”
Hotaru stopped as well and looked around the area. “T-This is…”
“Yup, it’s a landfill,” triumphantly said Shino.
“Uhhh… S-Shino… Please don’t tell me this is what I think it is…” She was frozen in fear as her face went blue and even started to twitch a bit.
“This is where we search for Maihime Tenkawa’s trash.”
Hotaru grabbed her own face in disgust. “No. Nooooo… Noooooooooooooooooo!!” she shouted. She didn’t want to believe what she was seeing. “No way, Shino, Noooo way! I overlooked the other things you did, but this crosses the line!! You can’t be serious!”
Shino gazed off into the distance and murmured, “We crossed the line the moment we accepted this mission…”
Hotaru had no response to that. Looking troubled, she stood in silence for a few moments.
“B-But…” she finally said. “It’s just so creepy looking through people’s trash…”
“It’s not creepy; it’s part of my investigation. Plus, the trash is one of the best places to find intel in general. We can find traces of what she ate, understand her hobbies, and maybe even find some unwanted documents.”
“Y-Yeah, but…” Hotaru shook her head— she still couldn’t accept it.
“So we’ll be stuck not being able to get any new information?” snapped Shino.
Hotaru looked at him in despair for a few seconds before giving in and sighing.
“… Okay, I got it,” she reluctantly said, “but how are you going to search through this?” She drooped her shoulders solemnly and looked around the landfill.
The landfill stored all the trash from the city, so there was a considerable amount of trash within it. Since it was stacked high with clear garbage bags filled with trash, finding Maihime’s was near impossible.
Shino nodded slowly as he took out two pairs of rubber gloves from his pocket and handed a pair to Hotaru. “Let’s do this.”
By now, Hotaru looked even more distressed. She yelled, “You’ve got to be kidding, right…? RIGHT????” She was in tears.

Shino would not budge, however, and his facial expressions didn't even change. Seeing this, Hotaru unwillingly took the pair.
"…. Fine, I'll do it," she said. "You have any leads? Without any, it's impossible to look through all this, right?"
"Yeah. From what I saw yesterday, she threw out last month's budget papers, a box from some cake shop called *Vielje*, and some of her worn out socks. If you spot any of those, we'll bring it back with us."
"…S-Sure." Hotaru winced back in disgust.
Shino couldn't understand why Hotaru was feeling this way. After all, she was the one who asked, wasn't she?
"Well, let's hurry," he said, unconcerned. "If we take too long, the trash will get burned up."
"I-I know…"
Shino put on his gloves like how a surgeon would. Hotaru, on the other hand, slowly put hers on, clearly not happy with what she was about to do. After doing so, the two entered the landfill and started looking through the trash bags one by one.
"This is… actually, nope. This isn't it either," said Shino.
In contrast, Hotaru started to cry a little bit as she cried out, "… It stinks so bad… so, so bad…."
As she said that, the two suddenly heard a voice behind them. "What are you two doing there?" the voice said.
Shino and Hotaru both looked behind them at the same time and saw a tall girl with her arms crossed, standing a ways back from them. She had short hair and beast-like eyes with slightly vertical pupils. From a glance, the scarf around her neck also seemed particularly interesting.
"Who are you?" asked Shino.
With a coarse voice, she answered, "I'm Ginko Sajihara, a third year. Who are you two?"
Hearing that, the two turned around completely. They introduced themselves with their names, along with the fact that they were both second years.
"I see…" said Ginko. "So what are you two up to here? Plus, what's with those gloves?"
"Uhh, this is because…"
"Well, you see, Shino here accidentally threw away something super important," interrupted Hotaru, waving her arms around frantically. "So we're just looking around for it…"
"I see. That's terrible to hear… There's so much trash around here too."
"Y-Yeah…"
"If you like, I can help out."
"Huh?" Hotaru couldn't think of anything else to say.
Ginko nimbly dashed over a pile of trash to where Shino was. Her beautiful nose and thin lips were now more visible as she slightly lowered her scarf.
"Excuse me for a bit," she said.

“…? For what?” said Shino suspiciously.
With her nose twitching, Ginko went in and sniffed the back of Shino’s neck.
“I see,” she said after a few seconds. She then pulled back and looked around the area. Finding what she was looking for, she lightly dashed to another pile of trash and picked out a single trash bag from it.
“Is this it?” she said after returning back with the bag.
“…! This is…” Shino turned speechless.
He noticed that there were things inside the trash bag that he threw out this morning: An empty box of nutritional-rich food and a rubber gloves package, for example.
“No doubt about it,” said Shino. “These are the things I threw out this morning.”
“Holy, are you serious?” said Hotaru.
It was a ridiculous turn of events. In this huge area, Ginko went directly to Shino’s trash bag without an ounce of hesitation. Shino didn’t know what kind of <World> Ginko saw, but he guessed that it was something related to the sense of smell.
With a calm nod, Ginko nonchalantly handed the trash bag to Shino. “I’m glad I could find it,” she said. “Now then, time to find what I came here to find…”
“And what is that?” said Shino.
Ginko closed her eyes and did a big sniff. Just like before, a few seconds went by until she suddenly opened her eyes, and once again, she went straight to another pile of trash and pulled out a single trash bag.
“Nice… my nose is spot on today,” she said. With a satisfied nod, she waved back at Shino and Hotaru. “This is it for me here! Next time please don’t throw away anything important by accident, okay?”
Ginko started to leave, but Shino called out, “Wait… please wait a second.”
She turned around, puzzled. “Is there anything else you needed? Perhaps there were more bags that you needed to find?”
“Not exactly.” He pointed at the trash bag in Ginko’s hands. “Ginko Sajihara, you’re actually holding something that I need.”
“…? What are you saying? This bag shouldn’t be yours, right?”
“It’s not. But it’s not yours, either.”
Ginko raised her eyebrows. She stood there thinking for a few seconds until she frowned unpleasantly and said, “I see… so if you know what *this* is, then you too, huh?”
“I apologize for lying to you earlier… But, I’m not leaving here empty handed.”
Hotaru just stood there, watching. “What are you two talking…” she paused for a few moments. “Oh!” she finally shouted as she figured out what was going on. She could see an empty cake box and some worn out black socks inside Ginko’s trash bag.
Indeed, the two were looking for the exact same thing: Maihime’s trash bag.

“W-Why do you have that…?” said Hotaru. “Oh! Perhaps Tenkawa asked you to do it?”
“Nope, this is just my hobby,” Ginko said with a straight face.
Hotaru was dumbfounded. “How can you say that seriously?!?!?!”
“Maybe I just feel indebted to her,” she calmly replied. “But it really feels like my purpose in life is to collect the things that Hime-sama had used. Anything she touches becomes a sacred treasure to me, so I don’t consider this a ‘trash bag’. Instead, it’s more like a bag of dreams.”

Hotaru actually shuddered upon hearing that. No sane person would say such a thing, because it seemed to be more like something a drunk would say.
“…Hey, Shino… this person has issues…” she said. “Let’s not mess with her. Please, let’s go home!”
“No way. The bag of dreams is right in front of me, so you think I’ll just let it get away just like that?”
“Don’t call it that…” she cried out once again.
Shino continued to stare Ginko down, and Ginko continued to stare right back. They stayed like that for a few more seconds until Ginko sighed, relaxed her lips, and loosened up her shoulders.
“Okay, fine,” she said. “It’s not often I come across someone with your kind of spirit, and plus, you two were here first. We can split this.”
“Thanks.” Shino bowed slightly.
Ginko pulled out a neatly folded tablecloth from her chest pocket and spread it out across the ground. She then took out everything in Maihime’s garbage bag and neatly lined it on the cloth.
Upon seeing her behavior, Hotaru went, “wow…” and furrowed her eyebrows a bit.
“Well then, let’s see… to split this up, we can take turns taking something from the pile,” proposed Ginko. She raised a finger. “Of course, I’ll go first.”
“Okay, I can do that.”
“Then here I go!” she said with a smile as she instantly went to grab the socks. “I choose these black socks, then…” she suddenly squealed in delight and trembled in ecstasy.
“Umm… Sajihara?” said Hotaru. Both she and Shino were in shock.
Ginko raised her scarf back up to cover her nose and said, “Ah, sorry, I forgot my scarf was down… But like always, Maihime’s socks have the most beautiful scent!”
Chuckling a bit, she then turned to Shino. “Now,” she continued, “it’s your turn, so pick whatever you want!”
“Wait a second. You should only be able to get the left or right sock, not both at once,” said Shino.
“What’re you talking about?” she raised her eyebrows. “Socks need to be paired, right? I can’t break up this set, you know.”
“Oh really?” said Shino. “Then you’re saying that just one of her socks is not worth it?”
“Huh…” she said bitterly. “Fine, you bring up a good point… I’ll just take one.”
“Thanks.”
“I don’t actually mind. My next turn, I’m going to get this way overused toothbrush, though…”
“… Are you serious?”

“Hehehe, careless are we?” Ginko said triumphantly while crossing her arms. “I was prepared to take either the socks *or* the brush, but thanks to you digging your own grave, I can get both!”
Shino clenched his teeth together and glared at her. “Damn you!” he shouted. “Then I’ll take this used plastic spoon, hah!”
“Y-You noticed that, huh? Not bad, really not bad at all… Looks like I can’t let down my guard, after all…”
“I appreciate the compliment.”
“But… Seems like you didn’t notice… THIS! The stick from a popsicle!”
“Seriously? Fine, my turn now… I take… These used TISSUES!”
Behind them, Hotaru stood there looking irritated. “Hey, can I just go back now…?” she said impatiently.
—
The next day, Shino and Hotaru both pretended to be sick so they could get out of class. They were in some sort of an inner hallway that seemed to be from a hotel. The walls and ceiling were white, and the thick carpet stretched completely across the floor. With Hotaru standing guard in one corner of the hallway, Shino kneeled down in front of the door and started to pick its lock.
“This does feel kind of weird, Shino…”
“Shhh!!! I’m about to open it,” he said, just as the door clicked open. “Nice, let’s go!”
“I-I don’t even care anymore…” murmured Hotaru.
The two entered into a room that was surprisingly large. Off to the side of the tiled entrance was another hallway, and in it, there were about four rooms.
“Woah… Are these really dorms?” said Hotaru. “These are like high class condos… or actually this feels more like an actual mansion, right?”
Shino turned around and locked the door. “This is where the city head lives… so this kind of place is to be expected.”
The two were in the top floor of the A block large-scale dorms. This was where Maihime’s room was located.
“Out of all the things we’ve done, we’ve finally ended up as burglars, huh…”
“We aren’t burglars. We’re more like secret home inspectors.”
“Sure…” replied Hotaru. She didn’t seem prepared to do this sort of thing. However, Shino didn’t take notice as he took off his shoes and stored his bag in the entrance cabinet. After doing so, he walked into the nearest room.
“This is… a bedroom, huh…” he whispered, looking around the room. The bedroom was pretty big, but it seemed to be exclusively for sleep and nothing else. The grand bed in the middle of the room, with the drapes and all that around it, was big enough for five people, and a delicately crafted antique shelf was placed along the wall.
“Alright, this is the place. Be thorough, but don’t leave any traces.”

Hotaru was still having second doubts about the whole thing, but she said okay and started to look for any information about Maihime's weaknesses. Shino walked to a nearby drawer and opened it.
"This is…" he said as he gazed inside. Inside the drawer were all sorts of tightly folded underwear: there was a bra decorated with cute frills and shorts that had an odd-looking rabbit character on them. "I see…"
Shino tried to put them in his pocket, but Hotaru quickly grabbed his arm to stop him.
"What are you doing, Shino?"
"I'm gathering intel."
"You know what those are, right?!?"
"Having clothes that directly touch her skin will give me a good idea on her physique."
"That doesn't even make sense!" shouted Hotaru. "Plus, you already fought her once, so what will knowing her physique do? If you take it, she'll definitely notice, too…"
"Ah, you're right. Then I'll just take a picture," said Shino. "One of the underwear… and… one of the room. There."
Hotaru looked defeated.
"So the room was like this… Hmm, I see," he continued. "I'll just put this one last thing here and we're done." He finished taking some more photos and pulled out a little device from his hip pouch.
Hotaru curiously took a peek at the device and asked, "What is that?"
"It's a hidden camera."
"Are you serious? You're resorting to that?"
Shino shook his head and said, "It's not what you think. I'm just doing some vigilante measures of my own."
"Somehow your excuses are getting more and more pathetic…"
"That's not true. Anyways, I'm setting this up now, so help me find a place where I can see everything in this room," said Shino. "The top of this shelf seems okay…"
He reached for the top, but suddenly felt something hard. "What is this?"
"Huh? What? There's nothing there…" she said suspiciously.
She couldn't see anything there, but Shino definitely felt something on top of the shelf… something like a small box. He carefully grabbed it with his fingers and lowered it down.
Hotaru's eyes widened. "Woah… something's actually there?" she said.
"It seems like it," said Shino, nodding. "Maybe this is part of somebody's <World>? Or…" he went deep into thought and walked across the room to another shelf next to the bed. He reached on top of that, and once again, he felt something invisible. "I see…" he murmured.
"There's one over there too?"
"Yeah… But who would put something like that there? And why?" Shino continued to think. He walked alongside the wall, thinking that perhaps

there were more of these things around the room, until he suddenly bumped into something and stopped.
“Huh?” he said as he looked ahead suspiciously. As expected, he couldn’t see anything, but he was able to feel something soft when reached his left hand forward.
All of a sudden, he heard a voice go “Ugh…”
“Wha—!!”
“Something wrong?” said Hotaru. Hearing Shino’s surprised reaction made her glance at him, but as she did, the empty space in front of Shino started to change. There was an off-colored ripple in the space, and it started to expand a bit until a single girl appeared from underneath.
Shino jumped back and took up a defensive stance.
Despite that, the girl took a look at him and just smiled. “Hehe, don’t be so defensive…” she said. “Aren’t we fellow intruders?”
She had wavy hair that went down her back. She also had a mole beneath her lip, and wore laces underneath her uniform skirt.
“Who are you?”
“Kurisu Nabariya, though just Kurisu is fine,” she replied. She had a friendly sounding voice, and her smile was just as friendly. “Nice to meet you… Ummm… Can I call you Shino? And you Hotaru then?”
Hotaru shuttered upon hearing her name, but Shino stayed calm. He glanced back at Kurisu and said, “So you’ve been watching us the entire time, huh? Was that also some of your stuff?” He pointed at the invisible object that Hotaru was currently holding.
Kurisu smirked and snapped her fingers. In an instant, the object started to ripple through space, appearing just like how she did earlier. Color started to ooze out of it until it became some sort of black device.
“W-Woah!!!” Hotaru was so surprised that she instinctively fumbled the devices around.
Shino’s eyes narrowed. “Those are hidden cameras, right?”
“Yeah. But hey, I really didn’t think there were other people who would sneak in here… and aim for the same things!”
“Same things?” said Hotaru nervously.
Kurisu placed both hands on her cheeks. “You know, looking at Hime-sama from the outside isn’t enough… we need more stimulus, right?” she said cheerfully. Her face flared up in excitement.
Hotaru’s eyes widened.
“Ah you know, I get it, I get it. Maybe in the beginning just watching from afar was enough. But soon enough, you kind of want *all* of her… Not just the her in public. You want her secrets for yourself so much it becomes unbearable. Right?”
“Umm…” said Hotaru.
“No? Not the same for you?”
Shino stayed as calm as always. “No, you’re right. I love Hime-sama!” he said, making a heart with his hands.

“S-Shino?” Hotaru blurted out. She was stunned at Shino’s unexpected gesture.
But, Shino walked up to her and whispered into her ear, “Calm down… There’s no way we can tell her our real goals, right? Just play along.”
Hotaru was speechless for a few moments before sighing heavily. “I love Hime-sama too…” she muttered. She unwillingly made a heart with her hands as well.
Kurisu nodded happily. “Exactly! Exactly! I love Hime-sama so much!!” she said. “This is actually my turf, but since you two came all the way here, I’ll let you place one hidden camera anywhere. Actually, just not in the showers or the toilet, okay?”
Her permission really didn’t mean anything because it obviously wasn’t her room, but Shino didn’t want to make things worse. So he just replied with, “I’m in your debt.”
“Nice, nice. Though, earlier you wanted to steal Hime-sama’s underwear, weren’t you? You didn’t take it, so it’s fine for now, but that’s a big no-no. Got it? Touching her will literally go against everyone who loves her… like us! I sneak in here with my ability sometimes, but never once have I touched her or anything she owns. So say it with me: No touching our beloved Hime-sama!”
The two begrudgingly repeated it after her.
“… Is everyone in Kanagawa like this?” whispered Hotaru a few moments later, quiet enough so Kurisu couldn’t hear.

Chapter 3: [Silent] and [Aegis]

As evening approached, the city of Kanagawa began to quiet down immensely, almost as if its livelihood faded away with the sun. The watchtower along the coast continued to stand guard well into the night, and as the moon shined brightly, the city seemed to come to a complete standstill. Today was no different— it was just business as usual.

Of course, while the city itself seemed to calm down at night, the students usually hung out or played games in their respective dormitories. Apart from a select few, shops were not permitted to stay open at night, so there weren't many reasons, if any, to go out.

In the academy, the student council room still had its lights on. The four Divine Pillars had convened to discuss their next move. Like the name suggested, they were the four highest ranking officers in Kanagawa. [Silent], [Aegis], [Invisible], and [Princess Road]… The four vowed to protect and serve their leader, Maihime Tenkawa.

"Well then," said [Aegis]. The scarf on her neck shook a bit as she spoke. "The reason we've gathered here today is because we have a picture of *that* student?"

"Indeed, here it is," replied [Princess Road] while booting up her computer. Once it was ready, she projected the footage onto the wall. As expected, it replayed the events of the mock battle. Maihime stood dignified on the field with spectators cheering all around. Like always, she was holding on to her large sword.

Upon seeing her, three of the four people in the room voiced their admiration:

"Wow, Hime-sama is so cool, right? Hey, hey, can I get another angle of her like this?" said one of them, squirming uncontrollably. "I want to see her in all her glory!"

"She really is. She's intense, yet cute. Brave, yet elegant," said another as her nose twitched. "It's unfortunate, but I can't smell her sweat from this video at all…"

The last pulled out her stuffed animal and began to talk to it. "… She's fabulous isn't she well to be honest I could have done a better job with the video in fact I could have shown her in even better ways you know."

They smiled, but when the video showed the final confrontation, their eyebrows shot up.

“Whaaat?”
“Huh? It was this student?”
“I see…”
[Princess Road] was confused by their unexpected reactions. “Is something wrong?” she asked.
The three did not answer her at all. They just stood there, deep in thought.
—
The sun rose once again. This time, Shino and Hotaru were in their usual 2nd year D class classroom, surrounded by their noisy classmates. Their lecture on specialized weapons had just finished, so it was time for lunch. Many of the students had already left for the cafeteria.
It was important to keep the students on a healthy diet, yet for many of them, eating was their sole pleasure in this world. As a result, their performance on the battlefield was directly correlated with the food quality, so the Administration Bureau and city staff paid very close attention to what they were serving. For the students to fight at their best, the food had to be tasty and nutritious at the same time. This luxury, a luxury that couldn’t be enjoyed by the adult fighters of the past, was made possible by the steady supply of ingredients from Chiba’s manufacturing plants.
Despite all that, Shino didn’t seem particularly interested in eating right now. He just sat at his desk, staring at all the information he had gathered up so far.
“Shino,” he heard from above.
He turned and saw Hotaru coming up to him. “You’ve been staring at that all class,” she said jokingly. “At this rate, I’m gonna tell the teacher!”
“I didn’t learn anything new in the lecture,” he said. “Besides, if their goal was to make us learn, this way is much more effective.”
“Well, yeah. But sometimes, I just think that you should act more normally, you know… Maybe speak up once in a while? So when trouble arises, you become less of a suspect.”
“Of course,” said Shino. “But why bring this up? You know that we have to keep a low profile, and not cause too much attention to ourselves.”
“Yeah, you’re right, I guess…” she said uncomfortably, but that went largely unnoticed by Shino. “Anyways, what’s the progress so far?” she whispered.
“We have plenty of intel now, and I’m done with all the observations. I’m one step away from figuring out our best course of action.”
Upon hearing that, Hotaru had a surprisingly bitter reaction. “Umm, how do I put this… That’s wonderful to hear, but… Umm…”
“In any case,” interrupted Shino. Once again, he failed to pay any attention to Hotaru. “If we can create a situation where I’m one on one against her, there’s a chance I can do it. So, yesterday I compiled all the times when she’s alone, but the issue is approaching her at these times. I can’t just barge in, and even waiting for her to be alone seems difficult.”
“Why?”

“Well, it seems like in Kanagawa, Maihime Tenkawa has the so called *Four Divine Pillars*,” explained Shino. “These four don’t protect her out of some sense of duty or obligation. Instead, they have a deep affection for her, almost to the point of worship, and that’s what drives them to protect and serve her. If I don’t take care of them, then it will be impossible to kill her.”
“F-Four Divine Pillars?” said Hotaru meekly.
“Yes. But killing the four is definitely not the play. If any of them dies, they’ll probably all be on alert. Instead, they must be led away from her without any suspicion.”
“C-Can you even do that sort of thing?”
“Yes, I have to,” he said, putting away his tablet and standing up. “Now that that’s done, let’s go eat.”
“Huh? Oh, sure… Somehow I don’t feel like eating, though…”
“It’s shameful for soldiers to be unable to fight due to skipped meals, but it’s even more shameful for them to pass up on the opportunity to eat,” said Shino. “You should, at the very least, eat in case you need the energy later. That meal could be the difference between life and death.”
“Y-Yeah, sure,” she nodded with a bitter smile.
Shino nodded as well, and prepared to leave the classroom with Hotaru. All of a sudden, however, they heard a commotion in the hallway.
“Huh? I wonder what’s going on?” said Shino. He peered into the hallway to see three girls walking towards him. The students were blocking the hallway, but they quickly made space for them to pass. “Woah, that’s…” he whispered.
Before he could finish his sentence though, the students around him drowned his voice out.
“What the..? T-Three of the Four Divine Pillars are here?”
“What in the world happened? This isn’t just any ordinary event!”
“Amazing! I wonder if I can take a picture with them…”
“Don’t even try… You’ll only get them angry!”
The chatter went on endlessly. The students were so hyped up that the three might as well have been celebrities. They represented the pride of Kanagawa just like Maihime Tenkawa, and many looked up to them.
“The Four Divine Pillars?” Shino raised his brow. His astonishment wasn’t from their sudden appearance in the hallway, but instead, it was from the fact that he had seen them before. Indeed, he was just talking about them with Hotaru… Their plan’s success was very much dependent on how they acted. They were, after all, close associates of Maihime Tenkawa.
“Ah! There he is!” said one of the Divine Pillars with blonde hair and a mole under her lip. She pointed at Shino, and the students all simultaneously turned their focus to him.
“Woah, you’re right. Shino, huh? Thanks for the other day.”
Shino didn’t say anything. With them knowing who he was, there was no way he could fool them any longer. With a regretful sigh, he walked out into the hallway and stared back at them.

“So what business do you have with me, Zakuro Otonashi, Ginko Sajihara, Kurisu Nabariya?” he asked adamantly.
In response, Ginko and Kurisu just smiled, while Zakuro darted her eyes away.
“Well, I wouldn’t call it business,” said Ginko. “I heard about a transfer student that did pretty well against Hime-sama in the special mock battle, so I thought I’d take a look.”
Kurisu piped in as well. “Hehe, looking at that video really surprised me. To think the transfer student was you… But now that it’s come to this, I can see that you haven’t been telling the truth, right?”
“… What are you trying to say?” calmly asked Shino, despite having an idea of what they were up to. The very same transfer student who fought toe to toe with Maihime was caught snooping around her just days later. That alone was enough for them to suspect him as a spy.
Despite their suspicions, right now there was no way they could know what Shino was up to. They probably couldn’t decide if Shino was a good or bad guy, so they were trying to shake him up a bit to see how he would react. That’s why Shino responded calmly without revealing any emotion.
Zakuro had stayed quiet up until now, but she ripped off her panda and started speaking to it in a monotone voice. “… You two really beat around the bush huh fine I’ll say it clearly to you Shino we are not pleased with you snooping around Hime-sama,” she said, tightening her grip around the panda’s neck. “So if I completely beat you up and win then you wouldn’t mind not going near Hime-sama anymore right?”
She flipped him off without so much as a glance in his direction.
Hotaru’s eyes grew wide. “S-So… So that means that…!”
“—It’s a ‘Ranked Battle’, right?” interrupted Shino. He darted his eyes back at the Divine Pillars.
The three stayed focused while the students around them gulped in anticipation. It was a natural reaction for the students… After all, one of the Divine Pillars just challenged him to a duel.
Kanagawa was a defense city— its only purpose was to protect the citizens within from external threats. Personal grudge matches between students were normally forbidden. However, they could be done under the pretense of training, just like Maihime’s special mock battles. Even so, fights would have to go through lots of paperwork and official reviews before being approved, because points were at stake.
That being said, high rankers would almost never fight low ones in the “Ranked Battles.” If they did, the outcome was usually determined before the fight even began, and the points they got from winning would be trivial. So, that’s what makes the circumstances so special this time. It gave Shino a good opportunity to do what he wanted to do.
“Hmph!” he said, nodding and staring back at Zakuro. “I’ll do it.”
Hearing that, Hotaru let out a cry. “Shino!?!?” However, before she could say anything else, Shino continued on.

“But! If you are going to impose those conditions on me, then I’m going to do the same for you.”
“… What do you mean?”
Shino pointed his finger aggressively at Zakuro. “You just said it yourself, didn’t you… If I lost, I had to stay away from Maihime Tenkawa. Well, if that’s the case, if I win… *I’m taking your place*.”
Zakuro’s eyebrows twitched. When Shino said “your place,” he didn’t mean the place where Zakuro lived in, obviously. He didn’t even mean her place as a member of the Four Divine Pillars. Zakuro knew that he was asking for the rights to stalk Maihime.
Ginko and Kurisu noticed this as well. They looked at each other and grinned in amusement. Zakuro, however, was not so amused.
“*Tsk*. You act as those you already won and it’s pissing me off,” she said. This time, she was not only choking the panda, but twisting its neck mercilessly as well. She turned and glared at Shino. “But I will do it after all your chances of winning are exactly zero.”
And with that, the ranked battle between Akira Shinomiya and Zakuro Otonashi had been decided.
—
The next day, a crowd of students gathered around the training grounds, the same place where Maihime hosted her special mock battle. The large turnout surprised nobody… On one side was one of the highest-ranking students in the city, and on the other was a mysterious student who fought evenly with Maihime. The hype for this ranked battle was through the roof.
In the midst of all the cheers from the surrounding audience, Shino quietly looked around the field. Unlike last time, he was at the center of attention. Everyone’s focus was fixated on him alone, and there were even some students cheering his name. Off to the side, what looked to be members of the newspaper club were incessantly taking pictures as well.
Shino didn’t plan to stand out at all, but this time there was no other choice. Besides, compared to the time when he fought Maihime head on, the risk here was nothing. In fact, that line of thinking was what propelled him to accept the fight in the first place. If he couldn’t hide anymore, then there was nothing else to do but win those rights in a spectacular fashion.
He wanted those rights not for stalking in particular, surprisingly. His real goal was to keep Zakuro away from Maihime, and this was the best way to do it. By winning, he could get her out of the equation without killing her.
The crowd suddenly cheered even harder, snapping Shino back into reality. He looked up and saw that Maihime, Ginko, and Kurisu had entered the audience seating area. As always, Maihime’s coat fluttered in the wind. She took her reserved seat and eagerly stared out into the field. It seemed this battle was a big deal… So big, that even she came to spectate.
“Ah!” she said cheerfully as her eyes met with Shino’s. She jumped up and started waving at him.

Despite her enthusiasm, Shino looked away and sighed. Once he did, the audience started to boo.
“Wow! Hime-sama waved at him and he does *that*?”
“YEAH! Show some RESPECT!”
Being made a public enemy of Maihime would be troublesome, so he waved back reluctantly.
“He’s making a move on Hime-sama!”
“Screw you! Know your place!”
Shino was at a loss of what to do. He sighed once again and lowered his hand. At that moment, however, the speakers turned on with an announcement.
Well then, let’s begin our battle between Zakuro [Silent] Otonashi, and Akira Shinomiya!
The announcer pumped up the crowd even more, but Shino was a little confused. After all, he was still the only one on the training grounds…
Or so he thought. In a split second, about 100 meters in front of him, Zakuro had suddenly appeared out of thin air. She appeared so suddenly that it felt like the world had snapped in that very moment. As her nickname suggested, she had entered silently, and she calmly stood on the field.
She was wearing the same outfit as yesterday, but this time she was holding a specialized weapon that was almost as tall as she was. The weapon had a long handle with a curved blade, looking eerily similar to the scythe of a grim reaper. There was also a little fluttering panda strap attached to the edge of the handle, though it really did not look much like a panda at all.
“What’s the matter Shino you don’t look so well,” she said, grinning.
Despite the arrogance, she wasn’t even looking at him. This time, she was staring at that very panda strap.
“That entrance did shake me up a bit, though it’s really no problem at all.”
“Hehe is that so that’s good then if I didn’t beat you when you’re at your best then it’d be annoying if you kept trying to void the outcome.”
“Don’t get the wrong idea. When I said that it wasn’t a problem, I wasn’t referring to my condition. I was referring to you. Your <World>, your capabilities, your strategies… *everything* you have won’t be a problem for me at all.
“… You really don’t know how to shut your mouth do you well not that it matters to me anyway,” she said. She then turned to Maihime in the audience and shouted, “This victory from Zakuro Otonashi will be dedicated to you Hime-sama.”
It was a quick declaration of victory, and with it, the crowd went even wilder. Zakuro waited for the crowd to die down a bit before continuing on.
“But just a plain old battle is kinda boring so how bout this Hime-sama if I win within five minutes can I get some kind of reward?”
Maihime’s eyes widened. “Sure… But what do you want?”
“I want to lie on your lap while you pat my head.”
“That’s it?” giggled Maihime. “Sure! Do your best!”

“I’m grateful,” said Zakuro, bowing her head. She then turned back to Shino and pointed her scythe at him.
Seeing that, Shino took up his low fighting stance. His type-38 specialized Katana was still sheathed, but he held onto the handle anyway and prepared to draw it out. The crowd turned silent as they watched the two take up their stance. Once they quieted up, the announcer started to speak up.
Well then, let’s… LET’S BEGIN THE MATCH!!!
In an instant, Shino began to unsheathe his sword while continuing to stare at Zakuro. After seeing her <World> twice now, he had an idea of how to deal with it. He would strike before she even had a chance to materialize it. His sword started to shine, and he could feel his power well up in it. Once he released his attack, she should be completely done.
Should be.
Shino held his breath. The moment he drew out his sword, Zakuro suddenly disappeared from his field of view, and he sliced nothing but thin air. He could cut anything he saw, but that in itself was a weakness: He couldn’t cut what he couldn’t see.
He immediately felt a presence behind him, causing him to duck. The scythe swung right where his head was just at, but it followed through without touching him at all.
“Oh wow you dodged that that’s pretty good intuition honestly,” he heard from above. Because he dodged at such an awkward angle, he couldn’t get a chance to see her. With his body still twisted, he swung his katana at Zakuro’s feet to try to knock her down.
However, once again he felt himself cut through thin air. He got up a bit just in time to see Zakuro about to swing her scythe down directly at him. Shino grunted and jumped back. The scythe, now covered in an aura, hit the area he was just at and exploded on the ground, causing dust to fly out everywhere. Once the dust settled, he saw a hole in the ground next to her, but he quickly swung his katana at her. However, she disappeared instantly only to reappear back to her original position.
Shino was speechless; sweat started to drip down his face. Zakuro’s speed was much faster than what he had anticipated, and she didn’t have any tells for her movement. It was as if she was teleporting straight to Shino’s blind spots for her attacks. Her nickname [Silent] certainly suited her well.
“You sure talked big though I’ll admit that was pretty good and I see how you could put up a fight against Hime-sama,” she said, glaring at her panda strap.
She kicked the ground… Suddenly her voice was to Shino’s right. “But you won’t win by just dodging you know,” she said, swinging her scythe at his neck.
Shino swung up to block the attack. At the same time, he caught a glimpse of Zakuro in his right eye, so he went in for a strike to her face with his left hand. It connected, making Zakuro flinch for a moment, but Shino couldn’t

follow up with any more attacks as she instantly disappeared and reappeared once again to a different location.
Disappear only to appear; appear only to disappear. She was taking the notion of hit and run to the limit. So much in fact, that Shino felt like he was fighting a ghost. Using solely his reflexes and intuition, he could do nothing but dodge the lethal blows that come his way. Even so, there was no way he could keep up this kind of defense for a long period of time.
Zakuro continued her assault, slicing Shino on the shoulder with one of her attacks. It wasn't a fatal blow, but it did knock him onto the ground. He quickly rose up to his knees, knowing that he was extra vulnerable on the ground, and pointed the tip of his katana at Zakuro.
"Oh the fight's pretty much decided but you still have some fight in you huh."
Tsk. Shino knew that it wasn't going to work, but he stared at Zakuro anyway and gripped his katana tighter for an attack.
It was at that moment that he saw something shiny out from the corner of his eye, causing him to raise his eyebrow curiously. Near his feet was the hole that Zakuro had made moments earlier from her explosive attack, and there was a small coin in it.
"Not bad for you to get this far," whispered Zakuro, pointing her scythe at Shino. In reality, Shino was much stronger than she thought. She wasn't messing up her attacks or anything like that, but they just didn't seem to be doing much damage. He was even able to get a hit on her, something only the other Divine Pillars were capable of.
"Heh," said Shino. He turned to Zakuro and leapt at her, kicking some dust up from his feet. It seemed like he knew that he had to change his tactics for a chance to win.
Zakuro took one look at that and grinned. She was able to move freely anywhere within the training grounds, so what he did was quite the poor move. She moved a few meters back to dodge his attack, and then kept appearing around just to toy with him. Shino tried to keep up, but stopped after a while, probably figuring out that it was pointless to chase after her any more.
Every time Zakuro appeared, whether it be from the front, back, right, or left side, Shino would desperate try to follow her with his eyes to no avail. Seeing his desperation, Zakuro chuckled. "Well then I guess I should hurry and finish this up," she said, finding humor in his struggles. She swung her scythe around towards Shino, and materialized her <World> once again. Immediately, she moved behind him and swung.
Shino anticipated her attack, so he blocked it while retreating backwards. Seeing this, Zakuro dashed to his blind spot for yet another attack. Up until now, Shino was only able to take roughly five or six consecutive attacks from her like this. Since her attacks were at such a fast pace, his limit was quickly exhausted.

The sixth attack came, and Shino collapsed to the ground. Zakuro prepared for the finishing blow.
“With this it’s over,” she said, appearing on Shino’s right side. She saw that he wasn’t defending himself anymore, so she went in for the swing on his neck…
Suddenly, she shouted in disarray. “What??!?!?”
Somehow, Shino was positioned right in front of her, ready for a strike of his own. Zakuro was dumbfounded… she knew she had moved to his blind spot. She had materialized her <World> so many times there was no way she could have messed it up. Her thoughts went all over the place, but she knew that this was not the time to hesitate. She had to get to a safer spot.

Even though she knew what to do, it was too late. Shino went down with a swing on her shoulder before she had a chance to get out.
“Ugh!” she cried out in anguish. She had taken the hit straight up, causing her to collapse onto the ground.
—
Lying face up on the ground, Zakuro coughed violently as she tried to catch her breath. The weapons they used in mock battles were not the same as the ones they used in actual combat, but Shino still struck her with what was essentially a lump of metal. She probably would not be able to move for a while.
He took a look at her and breathed out a sigh of relief. It was a last ditch effort, though miraculously it worked out quite well.
“How… How’d that happen…” huffed out Zakuro as she held her shoulder in pain.
Shino walked over to the coin on the ground and picked it up. Turning back to Zakuro, he flicked the coin up once into the air. Zakuro’s eyes widened seeing that.
“As I thought, huh,” said Shino. Seeing Zakuro’s surprised reaction only validated his theory even further. If the coin had just been a regular coin used around the city, Shino would probably not have paid any attention to it at all. However, the coin had a pattern he had never seen before, with a smooth, almost rubbery, finish. As a result, he began to have doubts about it.
The coin consisted of the same material used to make the specialized weapons, which made it compatible with people’s <Worlds>. Realizing this, Shino theorized that maybe Zakuro wasn’t able to “teleport” freely, but rather just to a place where she had a marking. He thought that beforehand she might have buried some marked coins around the area and just moved between them during the fight.
He paid very close attention to where she moved to, and noticed that she moved within a set pattern. When he discovered the coin, he hid it within his hand as he fought on. By doing so, he was able to bait her into moving to it, giving him a clear hit on her.
“I… No way… Even if you figured out my <World>… there was no way you could have known when I would go to *that* coin…”
“You’re right. That’s why it was merely a guess. I just chose the spot where it was the most likely for you to move to it.”
“What…”
“Also, one more thing. The other day when you showed me all the photos you took of Maihime Tenkawa, a lot of them were shot from the right side. So I thought that your finishing move might come from the right side as well.”
He walked over to Zakuro and dropped the coin on her chest. “Remember this, and remember it well,” he continued. “*Everything begins with observation.*” He sheathed his sword.

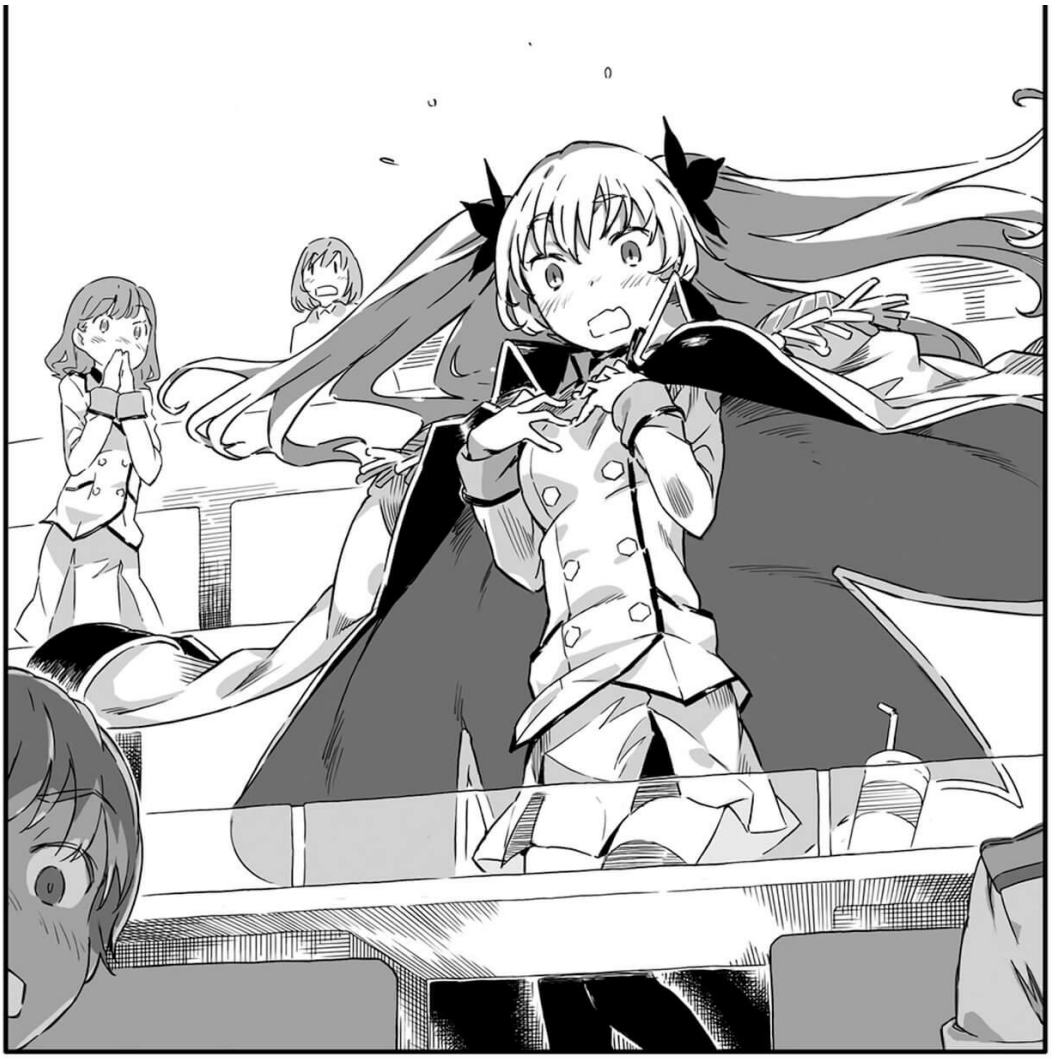
Zakuro was still in shock. With her eyes even wider than before, she turned to look at him. Honestly, it was probably the first time she and Shino looked face to face.
“Ugh…” she groaned once again,” slumping her head back into the ground.
And… It’s been DECIDED!! What an upset!!! The transfer student Akira Shinomiya actually defeated one of the Divine Pillars!!! What is going on?!?!?
With that announcement, the crowd started to cheer, and Shino’s victory had been decided. With it, he was one step closer to getting rid of all of Maihime’s close associates.
At that very moment, he remembered something that Zakuro had said before the fight. He waited for her to be carried off in a stretcher before turning to Maihime in the audience.
“Tenkawa Maihime!” he shouted out.
“…? What is it?” Maihime replied solemnly. She looked very worried for Zakuro as she watched her get carried off, but she turned back to Shino.
“I won this match within five minutes… So I would also like a reward,” said Shino.
“… Huh?” Surprisingly enough, it wasn’t Maihime who was speechless. No, that voice came from Ginko, who was sitting next to her. “What are you saying?” she continued, “That was ultimately a promise between Hime-sama and Zakuro only!”
“Heh… indeed it was. If that’s the case, let me make the same request too. Tenkawa Maihime, if I win within five minutes, give me a reward.”
Maihime’s eyes widened. “Huh? If you win… but didn’t you just win?”
She wasn’t wrong, but Shino was referring to something else. He looked at the two students, Ginko and Kurisu, sitting next to her.
“Ginko Sajihara, and Kurisu Nabariya. One your fellow Pillars was defeated by a transfer student in no time at all. Are you really okay with letting it end like this?” said Shino. He waggled his finger at them, clearly telling them to bring it on.
“Shino, are you saying…”
“What…?”
Looking slightly confused, Ginko and Kurisu responded accordingly.
“I’m saying I’ll give you two a chance to bring some honor back to the Divine Pillars…” said Shino. “Look at my condition right now. Surely you can’t be scared to fight?”
OOOOOOOOHH? What is this? The challenger Akira Shinomiya has just challenged the Divine Pillars!!
Nobody had expected this, so both the announcer and the crowd went wild.
Ginko, however, clenched her teeth together and turned towards Maihime.
“Hime-sama,” she said, bowing her head. “I have a request.”
Before she could say any more, Maihime nodded. “Sure, go for it.”
“Thanks, I’m in your debt. I’m sorry it had to come to this, but…” She took a good, hard look at Shino. “Don’t worry, I won’t lose.”

In one go, Ginko leapt down to the field. “I gotta say this first. Sorry, Shino. It’s exactly as you said. For us, the Four Divine Pillars that serve Hime-sama… We can’t have some random nobody beating us.”
She raised her right hand high up in the air, and soon, somebody threw down her specialized weapon from the audience. She quickly equipped it to her right hand— it was a plated glove that had a claw-like blade on each finger. With it on, she looked like a frightening predator.
“There’s no turning back now,” she continued. She grinned and leaned forward. “You may have just won… but I’m going to snatch that victory away from you.”
“Sure, no problem, since I’m the one who’s gonna win,” said Shino softly. Turning to Ginko, he once again prepared to unsheathe his katana.
WOOOOOOOAHHHHHH!!! To think that Ginko [Aegis] Sajihara would step to the plate first! She has accepted the challenge to avenge her fellow Pillar!!!
The announcer’s voice echoed far into the distance, and the crowd started cheering like there was no tomorrow. In contrast, Shino and Ginko silently stared at one another, trying to figure each other out. It may have been quiet on the field, but they were just as hyped as the crowd.
At that moment, Ginko suddenly transformed strangely. She roared out, trembling while her aura consumed her entire body. Her short hair shot out and extended down her back. It was safe to say that this was her battle form, as she did look like a werewolf from a horror movie.
“Sorry for the wait,” she said after she finished transforming. She ran her plated glove through her hair a few times.
“Alright, let’s do this,” said Shino.
Well then, let’s start the next, totally-not-planned, battle! Battle…. START!!!
Ginko took a breath, crouched down, and got on all fours. She didn’t seem human with her monstrous legs, and she wasn’t anything like Zakuro, where Shino had a tough time connecting his hits.
That being said, she didn’t lunge directly at Shino. Instead, she ran circles around the training ground with her metal claw dragging across the ground. Shino didn’t know what she was doing at first, but when the air got all dusty, he knew.
“T-This is…”
“Sorry about this. But it seems like it’s bad if you see me somehow,” said Ginko through the dust. From Shino’s fight with Maihime and Zakuro, she probably had a good idea of what Shino’s <World> was. The dust was a surefire way of hindering his field of vision.
The dust blew around in the air like a tornado. There was so much of it that Shino had trouble opening his eyes, so he instinctively covered his face with his left hand. Of course, there was no way that Ginko could have seen Shino as well, though he didn’t drop his guard one bit.

The other day in the landfill, Shino saw Ginko accurately pick out a single trash bag out of the countless others with her extraordinary sense of smell. With that, she could still know where Shino was just from his scent alone.
He suddenly felt a killing intent, so he shoved his katana out in front. *DING!* Without a moment's notice, the sound of two metals clashing rang in his ears, and he felt the heaviness of the blow through his katana. As he expected, Ginko knew exactly where he was. At this rate, it was only a matter of time before he was finished.
However, he didn't have a set plan to counter this. He could always just bait her close to get a glimpse of her, but a solid defense did seem like the better option. Besides, going into a battle of speed with a monster like her was way too risky.
"…."
After a few seconds of silence, an idea popped into his head. He could not guarantee that it would go well, but he didn't have any other choice. He resheathed his katana and as usual, took a stance that would allow him to quickly draw it out again. This time, however, he reached into his shirt pocket and closed his eyes.
With his eyes closed, he was able to concentrate on trying to sense where Ginko was. "Oh!" he said after a few seconds of searching. He sensed Ginko's presence once again, and at the same time, he pulled *that* out of his pocket.
That… meaning Maihime's sock.
"What the…?" Ginko was coming in close on Shino, but this made her stop right in her tracks.
He didn't let this precious opportunity slip by. Opening his eyes, he drew his sword out and slammed his katana down on her head. Ginko cried out in pain— it was a direct hit.
A few moments later, the dust settled, and the audience was able to see her collapsed on the ground.
WHAT???What is going on??? I can't believe this!! What happened in the midst of all that dust? Did Akira Shinomiya really take down another Divine Pillar???
Despite the speaker's high intensity, the announcer spoke with such a shaky voice. Shino, on the other hand, didn't speak at all as he put the sock back into his front pocket. There was one more Divine Pillar left, Kurisu Nabariya, and she was calmly sitting down with a smile.
"Well then," said Shino, "That's two down for me. Are you gonna come down here too?"
Kurisu covered her mouth as she laughed. "I guess so. It's a shame but I'm going to have to pass. I don't even like the way Zaku and Gin fight, you know? Plus—" she said, running a finger across her lip. "If I screw around too much, the last Divine Pillar will probably get mad."
"The last one…?"

“Yeah. She’s known as the [Princess Road]. As the name suggests, she helps guide Hime-sama’s every move. She even has huge influence over her from the shadows.”
“What did you say?” Shino darted his eyes at her. Influence over Maihime Tenkawa… Those were words that he absolutely couldn’t ignore. After all, no matter how much investigating he did, he couldn’t find enough information that warranted Maihime’s assassination. If there was someone controlling her from the shadows, then there was a chance that the Administration Bureau screwed up again…
As he was thinking that, a glasses wearing girl was pushing her way through the crowd. “Kurisu!” she said, coming up to her side.
“Ah, Ao! You’re late.”
“Don’t ‘you’re late’ me…” she said, sighing. “What’s going on here?”
Looking at the glasses girl, Shino raised his eyebrows inquisitively. He had a feeling that he had met this girl before… No, he certainly did. She was the girl he had taken captive a while back, the girl that was forced to become Hotaru’s “friend.”
“Ughh…” she continued. “Everyone suddenly asked me to do a bunch of work, so I had a bad feeling about that…”
Kurisu giggled. “I’m sorry, I guess I really am interested in this transfer student… Ah! Yes, yes,” she said, taking Aoi’s hand and turning back to Shino. “I should probably introduce her. This is Aoi Yaegaki, the last of the Divine Pillars, nicknamed [Princess Road].”
“Huh?” Shino stared back blankly. Once before he was able to sneak up behind her and take her away. She didn’t seem to be stronger than either Zakuro or Ginko.
“Please stop with that nickname, Kurisu…”
“Why? It doesn’t seem too bad. I mean, it is pretty cool right?”
“Aoi Yaegaki,” interrupted Shino.
Aoi shuttered a bit upon hearing her name. “Y-Yes? What is it?”
“Is it true about you being the last Divine Pillar?”
“Hmm, how should I put it… Yes, I guess? Well, it happened before I knew it,” she said inarticulately.
Shino looked at her confusingly. “So you *are* the influencer behind-the-scenes.”
“Behind-the-scenes? I mean, no one else wanted to do this work…”
“[Princess Road],” said Shino, “and you guide Maihime Tenkawa’s every move.”
“If by ‘every move’ you mean her schedule, then yes, I do.”
Shino didn’t respond immediately. He took a few moments to sort out all the information he had just received.
“Aoi Yaegaki,” he said again.
“Yes?”
“I feel your pain.”

“Thanks…” she responded. She sounded extremely tired, but managed to crack a smile.
“Speaking of which,” said Shino as he turned to Maihime. “Since there is no one else to challenge me, I’m going to need you to fulfill your end of the promise!”
Maihime shivered. Despite squealing at first, she quickly gave in. “Alright, I’ll do it… A lap pillow with me patting your head, right?”
“Actually no. That was Otonashi’s request,” said Shino. “Mine is a bit different.”
“Huh? Then what is it?” she said warily.
Shino stared straight at her and began to speak. “This Sunday, how about having you go out with me?”
“Say what?” Maihime didn’t know what to think of this.
The same could be said for the students around her. Their eyes widened as they quietly watched the situation unfold.
“So… that means…” she continued.
“A date?” interrupted Aoi. She had sweat running down her face.
Shino did a small nod. It wasn’t exactly a date, but correcting them on it seemed like a real pain to do, so he just said, “Yeah…. Sure.”
There was a standstill right after he said that. Nobody, including the audience, said a word. But, that silence did not last long.
“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?” shouted literally everyone in the arena. Out of all the yells that had been heard here so far, this one was perhaps the loudest.



Chapter 4: A Date Between an Assassin and his Target.

In the middle of his room, Shino laid down everything he had gathered on Maihime. The room itself was a bit dreary when he just moved in, but now it had turned quite lively. Speaking of which, the room wasn't decorated with furniture or anything like that. Instead, it consisted of mainly photos of Maihime and various items taken from her bag of dreams.
"Shino, are you there?" said Hotaru, opening the door. She took a look inside his room and couldn't help but blurt out, "W-Woah!!!"
Shino turned his attention away from the materials on the ground. "Ah, Hotaru," he said.
"Hey… what is this?"
"What is what? The pictures? The stuff I collected? My video and or audio recording devices?" Or do you mean my documentation here?" he said.
"Just… everything," replied Hotaru. "Why did you think I was referring to just one of these things?" She carefully stepped around all the stuff lying on the floor as she walked to where he was. Once she was there, she took another good look around, her lips slowly forming into a dry smile.
"Yeah…" she continued. "If I was her I'd just about scream and run out by now…"
Shino nodded. "Of course, this is, after all, the power of information. If I found out that my enemy had been collecting this much intel on me when I hadn't done the same, I'd scream too at my own foolishness. Running out and rethinking my plans would indeed be the wisest move."
"Err… That's not what I meant," said Hotaru. She pouted. "Actually, forget about it. More importantly, why did you make that request?"
"Request?"
"You know… Umm… the date with Maihime."
"Ah," said Shino. He looked back at Hotaru. "This is just another angle of attack. I essentially gathered everything I could from the outside, but now this gives me a good chance to talk to her without anyone interfering.
"Ah, so that was it." Hotaru breathed a sigh of relief. "But wait, what do you want to talk about?"
"There's one thing I'm still not sure about."
"And that is?"

“You know, I’ve investigated Maihime Tenkawa to the best of my ability. Everything, including her hobbies, preferences, physical characteristics, day to day schedules… I may even know more about her than her own self.” He looked troubled, but continued with a sigh. “I know that much about her, yet I still couldn’t find a reason why she should be killed. That’s the thing that’s been bothering me…” he said, rubbing his chin. “The more I looked into her, the more I came to realize that she’s a good person. Well, the order from the Bureau itself is enough reason to kill her, but still…”
“*Shino*.” Glaring at him intimidatingly, Hotaru sternly interrupted him. Shino raised his brow. He had never seen Hotaru like this before… her eyes were borderline frightening.
“You can’t be thinking of going against the Bureau, are you?” snapped Hotaru. “You can’t do that… We *must* kill Maihime Tenkawa.” Her words may have been inspiring, but her tone was cold and unwavering.
Shino looked at Hotaru a bit suspiciously. Though in the end, he nodded, saying, “You don’t have to tell me that— I know the Bureau’s orders are absolute. I’m not going to let that one thing stop me from carrying this out, since I’ve been committed to this from the beginning.”
He narrowed his eyes and continued. “She may be a genius, a monster, and a symbol of hope for humanity, but… I’ll kill her,” he said, clenching his fist. “I have no intention of going against our orders… I just wanted to know why. Depending on the situation, this Sunday may be the perfect opportunity to settle this once and for all. Make sure you secure our escape route.”
After Shino said that, some color finally returned to Hotaru’s face, and she was once again the Hotaru that Shino had always known. “Alright… good,” she said. “Sorry about that just now…”
“Don’t worry about it,” said Shino.
Hearing that, she responded with a cute smile.
—
“AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!”
A ghastly shriek echoed loudly throughout the student council room. It was Zakuro— she was doing her strange screams while furiously twisting her panda plush to death.
“W-Will she be alright?” said Aoi.
“Zaku…” said Kurisu. “Can you quieten up a bit?”
The two were enjoying their afternoon tea, but they sighed as Zakuro continued to ruin the mood.
“C’mon, Gin… you say something too.” Kurisu looked to Ginko in the corner of the room.
Unfortunately, Ginko was not herself as well. She was a shell of her former self, even looking like a mummy that had been left in the sun to rot. With her face looking anemic and her lips cracking, she probably hadn’t taken care of herself in a while. In fact, she looked so dehydrated that she seemed more like a dead tree than an actual human.

Aoi and Kurisu both looked at her and sighed again.
“You two, I can understand why you’re depressed after losing that Ranked Battle,” said Aoi, “but our real goal isn’t to win some mock battles… It’s to protect the country from <Unknowns>.”
Hearing that, Zakuro took her twisted up panda and shoved it against the wall. Her screams were slowly becoming intelligible until she finally spoke to Aoi using actual words, “…. But but date it’s a date A DATE with our goddess Hime-sama and this random nobody a date you hear?!?!?”
“Yes… I hear you loud and clear.”
“And also after that Hime-sama stayed in her room for so long it’s been twenty five hours fifty nine minutes and two seconds since I’ve last seen her oh my god *nooooooooooooooooo* I can’t live like this wow now it’s been twenty SIX hours I can’t take this anymore!!”
Zakuro coughed painfully, with Ginko immediately doing the same. Her lifeless body slumped against the wall as she too tried to make out some words. “… I … too … have … not …” she said with a raspy voice. “taken in … any Himenium …”
“W-What’s Himenium?” said Aoi nervously, despite knowing that Zakuro and Ginko were in no condition to answer.
Instead, it was Kurisu who answered. “You don’t know?” she said, raising a finger. “It’s what she gets when she looks at or touches Hime-sama. From that alone she could get a huge high to the point of euphoria, but it is unfortunately quite addicting for her.”
“So it’s pretty much a drug… But wait, didn’t Sajihara have one of Tenkawa’s socks? If she has that, then maybe…”
“Nah,” interrupted Ginko. “I could only… smell… Hime-sama’s sock so many times… before I can’t get her scent… from it anymore.”
Aoi didn’t say anymore. She wanted to ask, “How are you sniffing the sock for it to get to that point?” but refrained from doing so. Not only was she too nice and modest to say it, her instincts told her that something bad would happen if she did.
In that instant, Maihime thundered down the hallway. “Hey, everyone!” she said.
The moment both Zakuro and Ginko heard her, they rushed over as fast as they could.
“Hime-sama Hime-sama Hime-sama Hime-sama please look at me,” said Zakuro, unable to control her withdrawal symptoms. She pulled out her camera and started snapping Maihime’s photos from every angle imaginable.
Ginko had even worse withdrawal symptoms. She couldn’t speak due to a mix of being severely dehydrated and wanting to concentrate on smelling Maihime completely. She buried her face into Maihime’s armpits and slowly started to sniff around her body. Surprisingly, she moved around in such a way that she didn’t block Zakuro’s camera angle. Similarly, Zakuro made sure not to take too much time so she wouldn’t block Ginko for too long.

The two seemed to be of the same soul, both mutually helping each other succeed. It was certainly a sight to see.
“W-What’s up with you two…” said Maihime, flustered from their strange actions.
It took a while, but the two finally seemed to calm down. Zakuro’s body stopped shaking, and Ginko started to look healthier after getting her fair share of Himenium. In fact, the two were back to their normal selves.
“Thanks so much,” said Zakuro.
Ginko nodded. “Yeah… I was in a dark place just now…”
“Oh…” Maihime was a bit puzzled, but soon she seemed to remember something. “Ah! I got something to ask you guys about…”
“Sure, what is it?” replied Aoi.
Maihime hesitated for a bit. Soon enough, however, she stomped her foot down with resolve and continued on. “F-For a… date, what should I do?” she asked with her face red from embarrassment.
The Four Divine Pillars froze completely, being silent as the grave.
“T-This is the first time I’m doing such a thing…” Maihime rattled on, “I tried to look things up, but I just don’t get it…” She awkwardly looked away from the four.
Seeing her in that timid form sent the four into the twilight zone. They stood there dazed, just staring at her for a few seconds, until they slapped their own faces with both hands and returned back to reality.
“Y-Y-Y-You can’t be serious Hime-sama you are actually going to go?” said Zakuro.
“Huh?” she replied, “Yeah…”
“You can’t!” snapped Ginko. “Isn’t that just something Shino decided for himself without asking you? Plus, determining your ‘reward’ after the fight just isn’t fair! If you don’t want to, just refuse!”
Maihime slumped her shoulders. “But… a promise is a promise… and also,” she paused. “It’s not like… I don’t want to…”
“WHAT??” Upon hearing that, both Zakuro and Ginko were taken aback, almost as if her words sucked the life out of them. In front of the two was a cute and lovable young lady, but neither of them was on her mind. Right now, she was thinking of someone else.
As a result, the two felt a mix of despair and agitation, causing their minds to break and go out of control.
“S-So, what should I do…?” Maihime asked again.
Aoi giggled lightheartedly. “It’s fine, don’t worry too much about it. I’m sure he’ll take the lead, and ”
Before Aoi could finish, Ginko rushed to her and covered her mouth to prevent her from saying any more. At the same time, Kurisu motioned a ‘time out!’ to Maihime and walked to the other side of the room. Zakuro and Ginko soon followed, with Ginko dragging Aoi behind her. Even though she tried to cry out, nothing but muffled screams could be heard.
“What do you think, everyone?” whispered Kurisu.

“Is that even a question this shouldn’t be happening at all…” replied Zakuro.
Ginko nodded. “Exactly! I did think that Shino had feelings for Hime-sama, but I didn’t think he would make a move so soon!”
Kurisu finally released her grip on Aoi’s mouth, causing Aoi to cough once.
“Umm… Is there a problem?” she asked innocently.
Hearing this, the three (or rather, Kurisu, Ginko, and Zakuro’s panda), immediately glared at her alarmingly. Their gazes were so frightening that Aoi gulped in fear, shrinking back a bit.
“Anyways,” interrupted Ginko. “These are perilous times. We will stop him at all costs. Okay?”
Zakuro nodded her panda in agreement. “No complaints with me we will make Hime-sama give up on him.”
“Umm,” said Kurisu. In contrast to the two, she looked less confident. “Can we even bring this sort of thing up to her? I mean, just look at her…”
“Oh…” said the two simultaneously as they froze up. They nervously turned towards Maihime. Seeing this, her face lit up and she waved at them.
The three tensed up and quickly returned to their huddle.
“I-It’s impossible,” said Ginko. “I can’t bring myself to stop her…”
“Yes it’s impossible definitely not possible if we stop her and that makes her sad I’ll have no choice but to hang myself or throw myself off a cliff.”
“Exactly!”
Aoi seemed like she wanted to say something, but she remembered the last time she tried butting in and ultimately decided to remain silent.
“But even so, at this rate we’ll be sending her out without a plan, and we can’t do that for sure,” said Ginko. “She’s Kanagawa’s most loved leader, an angel who happened to descend on humanity. We can’t let some random nobody taint her.”
Kurisu nodded, but her face turned red. “Agreed. But… doesn’t that kind of get you excited?” she said, laughing nervously.
“Uhh… No it doesn’t… Even I’m not that messed up,” said Ginko, looking disgusted.
Zakuro was the same. “That’s a disgusting fetish you have you NTR loving pervert please don’t get close to me I don’t want all your NTR germs.”
“You two are the last people I want to hear that from!” pouted Kurisu. She puffed up her cheeks. “Hear me out, though… I don’t like the fact that Shino’s gonna hog her for one day, but how rare is it to see Hime-sama on a date? Actually, we’ve never seen her go on a date have we?”
Ginko’s eyes widened. “No indeed…”
“I really would want to see that,” said Zakuro.
“Right? Besides, it’s not like we can stop her anyway,” said Kurisu. “So that leaves us with our last option— we have to make the most out of this opportunity!”
The three stared at each other in silence for a few moments before someone nodded. Aoi was watching them nervously off to the side, but they didn’t pay

any attention to her at all. Instead, they all walked back to Maihime, giggling uncontrollably.
“Actually, Hime-sama, that sounds so fun!”
“But of course, we understand your worries.”
“Please leave it to us to make the perfect date plan for you so don’t worry about anything!”
Ginko, Kurisu, and Zakuro respectively said their assurances. Hearing that, Maihime looked relieved and thanked them with a smile.
—
Sunday rolled around, and this time Shino was standing in the middle of a plaza while surveying his surroundings. The plaza was right in the middle of downtown Kanagawa, and the area he was in served as a rest area for the shoppers. In the middle was a fountain whose water glittered brightly in the sun.
The place was a popular date spot even for downtown standards. Shino would spot some student couples walking by every so often. Since it was Sunday, there were probably more of them than usual. In any case, practically all the students who walked by him stared him down. Well, he did ask Maihime out on a date the other day in front of everyone, so it’s no surprise that he would be the center of attention.
He sighed as he glanced at the clock at the edge of the plaza. It was 10:55, almost time for their designated meetup time.
Just then, a small figure came strutting up from the other side of the plaza. There was no mistake about it— it was Maihime. Her hair was neatly tied into two ponytails, and for some reason she was carrying a rather large bag. Her movements were rather awkward, probably due to the fact that she noticed Shino looking at her as she walked up to him, making her quite nervous. Once she was face to face with him, she did a stiff, almost robot-like, bow.
“T-Thanks for… inviting me out… t-today,” she muttered. “I-I don’t do this often… so please help… me out… today!”
“What?” Shino was puzzled.
Maihime straightened back up. “Y-You know, I… don’t have experience with this kind of stuff,” she said, smiling nervously. “I did get a lot of advice, but as expected I’m still so nervous…”
“Huh?” You walk all the time around town don’t you?”
“Yeah, that’s true,” she said while twitching nervously. “I-It’s that… you know… a date is different than… you know, just going out normally… from what I’ve heard…”
It seemed that using the word “date” was the wrong move. Shino just used it in his request since it was pretty close to what he wanted, but now Maihime was all flustered and probably had the wrong idea about everything.
That being said, it was pretty lucky for him that she actually came out to meet him. He did force her to accept his request, and pissing off the Four

Divine Pillars probably didn't help out too much either. He was completely ready for the possibility that she would not show up.
But now, things were going great. He finally had the perfect opportunity to gather more information. Furthermore, if it was possible, he would complete the mission today. His lips trembled at the thought of killing her.
"Tenkawa, for now just calm down a bit so you can talk normally—"
"SHINO!" interrupted Maihime. She pulled out a little notepad out of her pocket and read the pages intently before looking back up. "There are plenty of places I want to go! That alright with you?!?!?" she shouted enthusiastically, her eyes suddenly filled with energy.
"Huh? Sure, I don't mind…" For a moment, he was overwhelmed by Maihime's sudden outburst.
Maihime smiled joyfully. "Okay then! Let's go, let's go!!!!" she shouted, skipping down the street.
Shino frowned. As expected, Maihime was as pure and as innocent as could be. No matter how much he observed her, she didn't seem to be the type of girl who deserved to die.
"…." He shook his head. He knew he must not be fooled by her actions and words. The very fact that she got him to question himself like that was proof that she was indeed a very frightening girl.
However, as he walked past the many shops that littered the sidewalk, he suddenly felt something weird. For some reason, Maihime was looking around restlessly, slowly creeping her hand up to him. Oddly enough, once he glanced down at her hand, she trembled, quickly drew it back, and tried to play it cool with a whistle. She would try the same stunt just moments later… It was very suspicious indeed.
"What are you doing?" said Shino, after the cycle repeated itself numerous times. He eyed her suspiciously.
Maihime's body trembled even harder. "Umm…" she said with an awkward look on her face. "I've read somewhere that in a date you have to hold hands… so I thought to do just that… but doing it feels so embarrassing!"
"It's no big deal, it's not like we decided on that. There's no reason to forcefully hold hands."
"A-Ah, you're right," she said, laughing nervously and scratching her face.
Now dejected, she continued to limp down the street. Every so often, she would silently turn around and stare at Shino, but Shino would stare right back. She continued to do this… again, and again, and again.
Tsk. Shino sighed. He's had enough, so he reluctantly grabbed onto her hand. "Let's go," he said. "Where to?"
"Huh? Oh… Yeah! Over here!" said Maihime. Her mood changed in an instant, almost as if she forgot she was depressed just now. Now holding Shino's hand, she once again started skipping down the street. Eventually, the two arrived at a store that featured some clothes from the display window. There were even a few mannequins modeling different outfits as well. From the looks of it, it was definitely a clothing store.

In general, the only clothes that the students needed were their school uniforms. Despite that, there were many who enjoyed wearing different outfits during the weekends. They were students, after all, and they wanted some variety in their life. As a result, the number of applications to start a clothing store was by far the most out of all the other types. This made the clothing space very competitive, so those who didn't see much business were forced to close down quickly.
"Clothing, huh?" said Shino.
"Yup! You know, my wardrobe is lacking… so I thought that maybe today you can help me pick out some new ones!"
Shino raised his eyebrows. "Why me?" he asked.
Maihime didn't hear him. She pulled on his hand and led him into the store.
"Welcome…" said the shopkeeper. His eyes widened as he saw her. "Woah, Hime-sama!" He sounded enthusiastic, but once he saw that she was holding Shino's hand, he sighed deeply.
It would be a lie to say that Shino wasn't bothered by that reaction, despite knowing that there's really not a whole lot he could do about it. He mentally cursed the shopkeeper for the lack of professionalism and looked away.
Maihime walked up alone to the shopkeeper. She proudly pulled out a card and flashed it to him. The card itself was something introduced to the city a few years earlier to help with purchases. Oh, and it was black colored.
"With this, please pick out a few date clothes for me!"
"Got it! On it right away!" said the shopkeeper, bowing deeply. He disappeared into the supply room to where all the other employees were and made quite the commotion. Soon, the employees scattered around trying to find the right outfits.
"What do you think, Shino?" said Maihime. "Am I doing this right?"
Shino stayed emotionless. "Doing what right?'" he asked.
Before Maihime could respond, the employees all gathered around her and brought the clothes.
"Hime-sama!" said one of them.
"How about this one?" asked another. He pulled out a bunch of colorful outfits for her to try.
Maihime looked at them in awe. "Woah… you sure got a lot, huh?" she said.
"Hey, Shino, what should I try on?"
"Any, honestly. Just try whatever you want."
"Okay…" she pouted and sighed. She then turned to the shopkeeper and asked, "Which one do you recommend?"
"Hmm… If it's for a date… how about this one?"
"Ah, okay! That looks great… I'll try it!" She took the clothes and headed towards the changing room.
However, Shino pulled her back from the shoulder before she could leave.
"Wait a second," he said. He pointed at the clothes she was holding. "Are you planning to wear that?"

The outfit exposed the shoulder, back, and stomach quite brazenly, so much that it was pretty much a swimsuit in terms of skin exposure.
“This? Yeah, I mean, it was recommended to me…” she replied.
“Yeah! This is perfect for dates!”
“It’s great for late bloomers!”
“Go and fight in that as well!”
The employees all fist pumped the air in excitement. Shino got pretty annoyed seeing that. He snatched the outfit from Maihime’s hands and went to pick out a more suitable outfit for her.
“… A girl your age shouldn’t be showing your skin,” he said, handing her another outfit while scowling at the employees. “Here, try this one.”
Maihime looked a bit flabbergasted as she took the outfit, but she quickly broke out into a big smile. “Sure!” she shouted before disappearing into the changing room.
Once she was done changing a few minutes later, she opened the curtains.
“How… is it? Does it suit me?” She blushed.

Shino was surprised with how she looked. He picked the outfit randomly, without knowing the latest fashion trends or her preferred style, yet the color and overall look actually fitted her perfectly. The white colors went so well with her pale skin and light hair that she looked like a real princess.
Shino froze… he didn't know what to say. It was easy to answer her question directly, but he wondered if that was really what she was asking for. Why did she want to come all the way here just to try on some clothes? More importantly, why did she take off her uniform? Shino pondered that for a bit until he thought of a possibility.
The Kanagawa uniforms were pretty much made for the battlefield. They were completely bulletproof and able to absorb blows to a certain extent, giving the maximum possible protection for the students. The fact that she was willing to take that off meant that she didn't consider Shino an enemy…
No. Shino played his own devil's advocate. Of course, that was a possibility. However, if that was the case, then there was another possibility…
Indeed, Maihime could have somehow figured out Shino's true intentions and was now probing him around for more information. She purposely made herself seem vulnerable, so Shino would be forced to reveal his hand. He thought that if he could read Maihime's mind right now, she would be thinking something along the lines of,
I took off my uniform, and I'm now wearing this defenseless outfit that YOU chose for me. Now… you gotta do what you gotta do right? Isn't this the perfect time to kill me?
Shino took another look at Maihime. Once again, he saw her red face and her timid expressions, but this time he knew what was up. However, he purposefully gulped anyway as to not give himself away.
It was imperative that she didn't sense anything unusual, because that in itself would be a huge red flag for her. The fact that she was probing around meant that she suspected him, but didn't have enough proof to be sure of it.
So, Shino gathered his thoughts and spoke.
"Ah, it fits you perfectly," he said with attitude, almost as if he was saying, *Hmmph! How about that for an answer? Your move now!*
Despite that, Maihime's face got even more red. "I-I see…" she said, scratching the back of her head. She then headed to a nearby employee and said, "Then I'll take this please. Can I wear it out? And also, do you have any shoes that go well with this?"
The employee was still mesmerized by Maihime's outfit, but quickly snapped of it. "Yes! Of course!"
She paid for the clothes while the employee removed the price tag. She then stuffed her uniform and overcoat into the large bag she was holding.
"Sorry for making you wait," she said after returning back to Shino's side. "Well then, let's move on to the next stop, Shino."
Shino hesitated… Just what was she up to this time? This false sense of peace he was feeling was giving him the shivers. Could it be that she really took off her uniform without an ulterior motive? No, it couldn't be… He

couldn’t let down his guard one bit. After all, it was probably all just a bait. If that was the case, then his best plan of action right now was to—
“Shino?” Maihime interrupted his thoughts.
“Ah… It’s nothing. Alright,” he said, nodding. “Let’s go.”
He started to walk out with her. Unlike last time where he grabbed her hand, this time she grabbed onto his first. It was so unexpected that he instinctively used his other hand to grab his katana. Despite that, she didn’t seem to mind, but Shino knew that she was really thinking,
Well well well… you’re this scared already?
“Wow, can you two quieten up a bit?” Kurisu sighed.
Next to her, Ginko and Zakuro were crying out in terror as they peered on.
“Even if you say that I can’t help it! It’s so painful watching Hime-sama date some random nobody!” shouted Ginko. She pulled out a handkerchief and wiped her nose.
Zakuro nodded. “Exactly but I really don’t know what I should be feeling right now my hatred for Shino grows every second but Hime-sama is just so cute here I can’t help it…” Her camera went wild with the amount of pictures she was taking.
As one could probably guess, the three were secretly following Maihime on her date.
“If you two were going to be like that you should have just stayed home,” said Kurisu, sighing once again. “Especially you, Zaku… You lost to Shino, right? You shouldn’t even have the right to do this anymore.”
Zakuro’s eyebrows shot up. She turned to her panda and said, “I was unwilling to actually keep my word on that but I can’t break a promise I made right in front of Hime-sama so right now Hime-sama just happened to be near where I was and in fact it’s such a coincidence that she just happened to be right in front of my camera so it’s all good.”
“You shouldn’t loophole things like that…” said Kurisu. She slumped her shoulders down in vain.
“Well, today’s a special day so there’s no helping it, right?” assured Ginko. “It’s Hime-sama’s d-date, right? This has never happened before so if anything goes wrong we have to be there for her. Also…” Ginko’s voice trailed off after looking back up.
Maihime was now walking down the street… while holding hands with Shino.
The three saw that, and were immediately hit with a wave of emotions: *Sadness. Despair.* ***Jealousy****. Hatred. Resentment.* ***Jealousy****. Grief.* ***Jealousy****.* They felt every single negative feeling imaginable just from that sight alone. However, once they got a closer look at Maihime’s new outfit, all this negative energy seemed to just melt away.
“Ah, you were the one who told her to get new clothes, huh, Zakuro?” said Ginko. “Excellent, really not bad. Thanks to you, my tears, nosebleed, and god-knows-what all stopped. Nice save!”

If the three were unable to stop Maihime from going on the date, then they had no choice but to make use of the situation. In other words, in order for them to stalk… observe Maihime at her finest, they all gave advice on what they wanted her to do.
“Well done, Zaku,” said Kurisu, seemingly overjoyed as well. “I can’t believe how cute she is in that… Hey, after can you print some of your photos out for me?”
“Sure no problem but look she’s heading towards the café next this was your request right Ginko?”
She took yet another picture.
—
“Alright we’re here!”
“A café, huh?” Shino whispered to himself. The café’s walls were all made out of wood, giving it a unique appearance. There was an open terrace right in front of the shop, and judging by the good weather they had all day, it was probably the perfect place to be in.
The two went and sat down on the terrace before Shino called the waiter over. They definitely had more chances to talk here than they did at the clothing store.
“Hi, welcome! Have you decided on your order?” said the waiter. He was startled once he found out that Maihime was sitting there with Shino, but quickly composed himself. Maybe the previous employee could learn a thing or two about professionalism from him, seeing that he was so much better at dealing with the situation.
“I’ll take the ice tea, and a club house sandwich,” ordered Shino. It was just around noon, so it was the perfect time for lunch.
However, right after he ordered, Maihime went, “Wait, NO!”
“Huh? The sandwich is no good?”
“Umm… no, that’s not it. C-Can you let me order for the both of us?” she replied softly.
Shino was puzzled. Surely, she was up to something, but he didn’t know what. “Sorry, but never mind on what I just said,” he said, deciding to go along with her for now. “Tenkawa will do the ordering.”
“Sure.” The waiter turned to Maihime.
Once he did, she stood the menu up between her and Shino and whispered something discretely to the waiter.
“Alright, thanks so much!” she blurted out loud once she was done whispering.
“I see. Please wait a moment.” The waiter did a little bow before walking away.
Once he was out of sight, Shino said, “Tenkawa.”
“Huh? What is it?”
“Now that we’re here, I have a few things I want to ask—”
But, before he could say anymore, he was interrupted by the whispers of the surrounding people.

“Hey, isn’t that Hime-sama?”
“Oh wow, you’re right. But, whose that across from her?”
“That’s the, you know, new transfer student. They say he asked her out on a date in the mock battle.”
“Woah, that was true?”
“…….”
A combination of the city head and the person who defeated two Divine Pillars would attract attention whether they liked it or not, not to mention the fact that Maihime was wearing a completely new outfit and had just been holding onto Shino’s hand earlier. With all that, they couldn’t help but catch the eye of the other guests and the people walking by.
Despite that, Maihime seemed to be used to all the attention she was getting, and Shino had expected this to happen so he was prepared for it. They would attract more attention the longer the day went on anyway. Not only that, once he accomplished what he really set out to do today, everyone would start suspecting him as the culprit, though he was prepared for that as well. If he didn’t have any resolve for this, he wouldn’t have asked her out in the first place.
He stared silently at Maihime sitting across from him. She was an extraordinary fighter who went beyond any imaginable limit, while carrying the fate of the city on her two small shoulders. He did not intend to go against his orders, but when he thought about killing her, he felt some inkling of resistance against the unknown superiors who gave that order.
Of course, he understood his foolishness in thinking this. However…
“…? Is something wrong, Shino?” Maihime looked up at him.
He must have had on a troubled expression for her to say that. “Nah, it’s nothing,” he said. “We’ll save it for later.”
Just as he said that, the waiter brought in the order on a tray. “Sorry for the wait,” he said, putting an enormous glass cup on the table. It was filled with some sort of tropical flavored juice, and its rim was decorated with bright and colorful flowers. “Go ahead, enjoy!” He smiled, putting two straws into the cup before walking back inside.
Shino didn’t expect Maihime to order such a thing, as it was probably made exclusively for couples. “What is this?” he asked after a short pause.
“Umm… just try it!” she said, trying to hide her smile while taking a sip. “It’s so good!”
Her smile was so pure that Shino knew it was genuine. She didn’t have any ulterior motives behind it or anything like that… Right now, she was just a girl who wanted to try out that drink.
No, she wasn’t. Shino stopped himself from thinking that. After all, only two lovers would drink from the same cup.
He thought of another possibility: Maihime drank from the same glass as him because she wanted to give the impression that there was nothing funny mixed in the drink. She did choose the shop, so perhaps she thought that Shino would think that there was poison… or even something like a

truth serum in the drink. By purposely ordering a single drink, she could implicitly show that the drink was drug free.
As he thought, for her to do that meant that she wanted Shino to lower his guard. In other words, she might as well be saying,
Well, I drank from this very same cup, see? There's nothing to fear!
She was pretty much treating Shino like a child. He clenched his teeth; there was no way he could let her look down on him like this. However, once he grabbed his straw, an alarm flew off in his head.
Tsk. They may have been sharing the same cup, but the straws they used to drink from it were different. Perhaps she used the single, same cup as a distraction so Shino wouldn't notice that his straw was drugged.
It was a cruel trick. Maihime's pure and innocent smile now looked more and more ominous. Of course, he couldn't be completely sure of this, but he had to be ready for the possibility.
Without saying a word, Shino grabbed onto the glass and turned it 180 degrees. His straw was now facing Maihime, and Maihime's was now facing him. He then took Maihime's straw, which was guaranteed to be completely safe, and drank from it.
Maihime was in shock. "Huh?"
"Ah, indeed. This is an exceptional drink, very delicious," calmly said Shino.
"Umm… Hey, Shino, that's my…" Her face completely went red as she stared at the straw that Shino just used.
Shino, however, was completely unfazed. "Huh? Is there a problem?" he asked.
Maihime tried to mutter something out, but in the end just shrugged her shoulders in embarrassment.
—
"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!"
Off in the distance, the Divine Pillars were ~~stalking~~ watching over Maihime when all of a sudden, Ginko held her chest and cried out in distress. No one could blame her for doing such a thing, however, seeing that she had just witnessed Shino indirectly kiss Maihime through her straw.
"I-I understand how y-you feel Ginko but please calm down at this distance and with your scream we'd be caught," stuttered Zakuro in a panic. Her eyes darted all over the place.
"Hime-sama's getting more impure by the second…" said Kurisu with a bit of excitement in her voice. "My heart's aching so hard…"
In the midst of all her confusion, Ginko broke out of formation. She had blood flowing down her eyes as she grinded her teeth repeatedly. Despite that, Zakuro and Kurisu seemed to calm down after looking at her rage.
"… Ginko are you okay I understand how you feel but please calm down," assured Zakuro.
"Actually," said Kurisu. "You were the one who told her to go here right, Ginko? Why here?"

“Isn’t it obvious?” snapped Ginko. She pointed at Maihime. “Normally in the student council room, Hime-sama would drink the black tea that Aoi makes… But since today is hot, she would most likely order something cold! And with cold drinks comes a straw! And once she was done with the straw, I would be able to snatch it away later! It was a perfect plan that *should* have been flawless….!” Her voice cracked before she could finish the sentence.
Zakuro and Kurisu nodded their heads in approval.
“I see I was wondering what you might have been aiming for…”
“Ginko is a collector first, then an observer, after all,” interrupted Kurisu.
“Though I didn’t anticipate him to just drink from the straw like that…”
Kurisu took another look at Maihime. With her face still red, she frantically took what was supposed to be Shino’s straw and finished the juice in one quick sip. Interestingly enough, when she did that, Kurisu noticed that Shino trembled a bit with fear. It was as if he was saying,
Damn… so that straw was just a normal straw, huh? But for her to purposely drink from the straw like that… is she trying to rile me up?
Even though he did look like he was thinking that, Kurisu thought it was just her imagination. Next to her, Ginko’s eyes instantly lit up. Despite all her doom and gloom earlier, the moment she saw Maihime drink from the other straw, her attitude completely changed. “Holy! A new straw from Hime-sama!!” she shouted. “I wasn’t abandoned by God after all…”
“Ah look the two have finished paying and they are heading somewhere let’s go after them,” noted Zakuro.
“Oh wow, you’re right. C’mon Ginko, let’s go.”
Ginko wouldn’t budge. “You two go on ahead,” she said, taking a zippable plastic bag out of her pocket. “I’m going to go treasure… and pleasure hunting.”
—
After going to the café, Maihime led Shino around downtown some more, but after a few hours they ended up at their final destination. Slightly beyond the walls of the city, they went near a cliff in the ruins of what was once a park. Behind them was a vast area of emptiness filled with severely damaged roads and broken streetlights. Before the war, the place was probably once a bustling park, since little remnants of peace were scattered around the area. In front of them, the ocean seemed to stretch on forever. The sea breeze lightly brushed against both their faces.
Shino narrowed his eyes as he silently looked around the area. Normally, students wouldn’t venture past the city walls unless they absolutely needed to. As a result, the usual hustle and bustle of the city disappeared, only to be replaced by the sound of the ocean waves and the occasional cries of the seagulls. They were also the only ones in the area, so at long last they no longer caught the eyes of curious bystanders. It was the ideal place for information gathering and assassination, both of which Shino intended to do.

However, he wondered if he could pull it off. He had no clue why Maihime dragged him all the way out here, since she didn't bother to explain anything at all.
In the midst of all his thoughts, Maihime called out, "Shino!"
He turned to see that Maihime had laid out a tarp on the ground. She then took out a large bento from her bag.
"What are you doing?" asked Shino.
"Umm… I made a bento… You're hungry right? Though it isn't too tasty…" she said, laughing nervously. She opened the bento on her lap to reveal that it was packed full of rice balls, and took one out for him. This must have been the reason why she didn't want Shino to order any food back at the café.
Shino hesitated, but soon sat down next to her, wiped his hands with a towel, and took the awkwardly shaped rice ball from her hand. He did not eat it right away, though. He took a few seconds just to stare at it, even though it didn't seem disgusting or anything like that. Rather, he was wondering if it was okay to eat something that his enemy made specifically for him. No, it was definitely not okay.
However, if Shino refused to eat it without a good excuse, she would immediately know why. So, if he ate it, he would be drugged. On the other hand, if he didn't eat it, his cover would be blown. It was a very effective tactic that put him in a lose-lose situation.
She was like the judge of a medieval witch trial. Under her restless gaze, she would sadistically sentence him to—
"No, she wouldn't," he whispered to himself as he sighed. From the time he came to Kanagawa, he had observed her, crossed swords with her, and today, even went out with her. At last, he reached a conclusion from all that. Indeed, Maihime Tenkawa was neither testing nor trying to kill him— she never had been. No matter how many times he analyzed the situation and did his mental gymnastics, he finally realized this fact.
Without a moment's notice, he took a bite into rice ball. Inside it had some smoked tuna, and as he expected, there was nothing suspicious in it.
"H-How is it? Is it good?"
"It's average. Actually, a bit below average, I'd say," said Shino.
"Oh…"
"You put too much water when you cooked the rice, and you pressed too hard when you molded it," he explained. "Because of that, the rice got too soft, so the texture becomes kind of gel like. Next time, you need to be more aware."
"I see…" she whispered softly. Dejected, she tried one out for herself. "Ah, you're right," she said, smiling bitterly.
Shino looked at her eat it and said, "But…"
"But?"
"It's not like I hated it," he blurted out.

He popped the rest of the rice ball into his mouth. Weirdly enough, he didn't know why he would say such a thing, but somehow he just felt like saying it. Maihime blushed happily and offered him another one. He took a quick look at it before taking an even bigger bite out of it. It was another sloppily made rice ball, but it wasn't like he expected anything different. Despite that, he couldn't bring himself to hate it.

It could have been that he was just relieved now that he knew Maihime was not up to anything. There was no way he could have tasted anything back when he was nervously trying to eat.

"……" He sighed. No, that wasn't it. He knew it wasn't anything complicated like that. He was probably just happy that Maihime made a bento just for him, not to mention today's "date" was actually quite enjoyable.

He knew that he was breaking the cardinal rule of assassination by making judgments based on feeling and emotion. He was well aware of it, but for some reason, he felt a strange feeling towards her… so strange, that he couldn't describe it with words.

In the midst of Shino's thoughts, Maihime softly moaned as she gave herself a good stretch. "This place never changes…" she said after.

"You've been here before?"

"Yeah, a *long* time ago, before the war ended," she said, gazing far off in the distance.

Shino narrowed his eyes. Maihime always had an innocent and pure expression, but she seemed different now that she was lost in her own thoughts.

"Something wrong?" She noticed that Shino was looking at her quite intently.

"No, nothing," said Shino. He quickly averted his gaze. "But still, to say this place hasn't changed is a bit strange, don't you think? This place hasn't been maintained in so long…"

"No, that's not what I meant," she said, turning to stare out into the ocean. The calm waters glistened under the sun's warm caress, making the whole view seem like something straight out of a dream. "Even though it's been over twenty years, the scenery here hasn't changed one bit…"

Maihime slowly walked to the edge of the well-eroded cliff. Once she was there, she stretched herself out once again. Shino did nothing but watch on in silence.

Right now, she was full of openings… Right now, he could actually kill her… He took a quick look at his katana. Using his <World>, or rather, his *Art of the Longsword 3*, he could easily slice her in two before she could do anything about it. It was a move he could only use once. His specialized weapon, much less his own body, couldn't handle the stress of using it repeatedly.

Despite that limitation, if he used it here… then there would be no need for a follow up strike. After all, Maihime was the only one here, so once he killed her, he wouldn't have to worry about anyone noticing.
Shino paused… he couldn't bring himself to do it. He would never admit that he was moved by his feelings or that he grew attached to her. It was just that killing her without understanding why would leave a bitter taste in his mouth.
"Tenkawa, let me ask you something."
"What is it?" she turned around. The sun was right behind her, making her face too bright to look at.
"You… Well, I've heard that you've been fighting as the head of Kanagawa for almost ten years now…"
"Ah… yeah. Wow, it's been ten years already, huh?" she said. She nervously scratched her cheeks and smiled.
"All the city heads get priority to everything, including going inland. That's why most people finish their term and graduate early so they can do just that." Shino paused. "But, why… why are you still here? Why do you keep fighting?" he asked softly.
Ever since he had been collecting information on her, this one thing had always bothered him. There was no way the Administration Bureau would kill her just for this, but it could have had something to do with it.
Maihime forced herself to smile. "I really am fighting for the sake of humanity," she said, after thinking about it for a few seconds. "It's not that I don't want to go inland, but I have yet to see fighters stronger than me…"
She wasn't being arrogant in saying that. No, she would never brag about her own power. She said it because it was the absolute truth. She couldn't entrust the fate of Kanagawa to anyone else just yet.
"The number one reason though… is something else."
"Your number one reason?"
"Yeah… I made a promise with a friend," she said. She seemed to stare even further out into the ocean.
Shino gulped nervously. "What was the promise?" he asked.
"I can't say… it's a secret," she said playfully, raising a finger to her lips.
Shino sighed.
"I want to tell you, but I can't," she continued. "Sorry… If I do, I have a feeling that it'll never be fulfilled… That's why, the secret's between me… and Hotaru."
"What?" Shino's eyebrows shot up. "Hotaru, you say?"
"Yeah, it's a cute name, isn't it? Her full name is Hotaru Rindou… my best friend."
"That's…" Shino's voice trailed off— he was at a complete loss for words. At first, he thought it was just a coincidence, but there's no mistaking it now. That name was…

Before he could say any more, he seemed to notice that the horizon far off in the distance was trembling a bit. Before he knew it, the city alarms behind him had sounded off.
<Unknowns> were coming.

Chapter 5: Despair That Creeps From the Horizon

Ripples beyond the horizon warped the sky in mysterious ways, and ominous shadows from the ripples seemed to materialize into the real world. They were grotesque; their very presence seemed to make the sky itself shiver in fear.

Soon, the ripples would disperse as they slowly crept forward. They had both biological and mechanical features, their bodies had numerous limbs that awkwardly grew out, and their uneven teeth looked capable of crushing everything in their path. Their skin was coated with some inorganic substance, almost like a bug's carapace or a knight's dull armor.

However, they weren't the only ones in the sky. Coming from the center of the shadow, little bizarre objects floated above the ocean. These humanoid things would soon get into formation, a sight that the students had witnessed all too often.

Their battle formation may have been very human-like, but one look at them was all it took to know that they weren't from this planet. Their intentions, even their language, were completely unknown. In the eyes of the humans, they were just mysterious intruders.

About twenty-nine years ago, the existence of these monsters became fully known to everyone through the pain and suffering they caused in their trail of destruction. They were the monsters that caused the First Great Calamity, the <Unknowns>. Now, remnants of these <Unknowns> had appeared before their very eyes.

A thunderous roar from the center of their fleet shook the air around them. It would be a stretch to call it a voice, but the surrounding <Unknowns> roared out in response from somewhere within their bodies. It was their battle cry.

"How many enemies?" asked Aoi. With the alarm shrieking in the background, she scrambled into the central headquarters room. The room was actually located in the center of the city in a facility right under the school building. There were countless monitors lined up against the walls of the room, all displaying images taken from the watchtowers along the coast. Of course, the monitors now displayed the remnants of despair that came from the horizon, the monsters that had destroyed the Earth once before, the <Unknowns>.

“Umm, we’re just confirming it now, but one Triton class, twenty Kraken class, and about… 2,000 ogre classes!” replied someone stationed at communications. Reports from all the watchtowers were coming in fast. These numbers far exceeded the norm.
“Ughh… Two battalions worth, huh? They even brought in a Triton…” Aoi scowled. “Why now?” She stopped to take a look at the <Unknowns> on the monitor. They lacked the ability to reason, so understanding and communicating with each other was near impossible. “In any case, let’s calm down first. Send a message to the entire city: Have the students split into their respective troops and stations. I’m putting the city on lockdown.”
“Yes Ma’am!”
“I’ll have Sajihara and Otonashi’s troops, two and three, stationed in the front. The fourth troop, Nabariya’s, will serve as backup for the others. Just don’t go for the Triton class or any other large ones first. Take care of the fillers. Once the path to it is clear…”
Aoi stared at the huge <Unknown> that had taken up most of the monitor screen and continued. “We’ll have Hime-sama slice it in two.”
“Yes Ma’am!” replied everyone in the room. Now that they had solid orders, they didn’t look as lost.
As she watched everyone working from behind, Aoi scratched her face. She had commanded them just like how Maihime would, but as she expected, it just didn’t feel right to her. It was even weird for her to refer to Maihime as “Hime-sama”.
In any case, she guessed it was fine since her words seemed to have raised their morale. After all, they were going up against a very large <Unknown>. If she could just quell that fear even a little bit, then it was all good. Of course, Maihime could have done it far better than she ever could.
Suddenly, a student handling the monitors cried out. “Yaegaki!”
Aoi trembled a bit, but eventually turned to the student. “Have the <Unknowns> made a move?” she asked.
“No, that’s not it…” the student took another look at the monitor. “There’s been no response from Maihime…”
“Really?” Aoi’s eyes widened.
—
Ten minutes ago, the alarm startled the Divine Pillars as well. Unsurprisingly, they were “watching over” Maihime and Shino.
“Alarm…?” said Kurisu.
“What no way what kind of timing is this…”
“Ah, Hime-sama’s going back to the city,” continued Kurisu. “Let’s get back to our stations before they start wondering where we went.”
Ginko nodded. “She’s right. We should get back before Hime-sama does.”
“Alright Zaku and Gin, you two go ahead,” said Kurisu. “My troops are just backing everyone up, so I’m going to make sure Shino doesn’t do anything weird as much as I can. If they ask for me, cover me, okay?”
The two paused before nodding.

“Then I will go ahead first Kurisu.”
“Let me know how it goes after the battle.”
Zakuro and Ginko said their farewells and took off. Zakuro teleported to a marking she had inside the city, and Ginko used her superhuman strength to jump away. Kurisu, now left alone, slowly stared out into the horizon.
“Hmm… That shadow… and that alarm… perhaps it’s one of the large ones,” she said to herself. Her lips slowly turned up into a grin. “This could be the perfect time…”
She snapped her fingers to materialize her <World>. In an instant, she blended in with the air around her, rendering her invisible.
—
“That alarm… <Unknowns>?”
Back on the cliff, Shino and Maihime stopped dead in their tracks.
Shino narrowed his eyes and glared up into the sky. “It seems to be that way,” he said softly. It was faint, but he did notice that the horizon was a bit distorted.
Maihime clenched her teeth and fist in anger. She was angry at the fact that they were trespassing on this scenery she adored since she was just a child. In her mind, she wanted it to remain free of <Unknowns>forever.
“Let’s go, Shino,” she said as she quickly turned around, causing her skirt to briefly flutter in the air. “Let’s get ready to counter them before they come to shore.”
Shino hesitated a bit before following her back to the city. It was true that this was the perfect time to kill her, but not once did he forget his most import duty of all— to protect the country from the <Unknowns>. The fact that the Bureau wanted her dead meant that her existence was a detriment to the country. With that being said, there was no doubting her skill on the battlefield. If he were to kill her now, Kanagawa would be in big trouble. That’s why there was no other choice. He decided that the best course of action was to… Shino stopped in his tracks. It was as if he was desperately trying to think of excuses not to kill her.
“…….”
With his mind still in disarray, he went back into the city.
—
The city was in an uproar. The students, who just moments earlier were enjoying their day off, rushed to grab their weapons and headed to their respective posts around the city. As a result, with the alarm shrieking in the background, the sounds of footsteps, shouts, and even a bit of crying filled the air.
The city had become a war zone in an instant.
“Well, let’s part ways for now,” said Maihime. “Let’s meet after the battle, Shino.”
“Ah, sure,” he said. He left to join up with his troop.
However, before he could go very far, he heard someone shout, “Shino!”

Hotaru ran straight to him through the crowd. Perhaps she had waited for Maihime to leave before calling out to him.
“Hotaru.”
“It’s become quite troublesome, huh?” she said. “What about, you know?”
“Not going to do it yet. If I kill her now, it’s going to affect the battle too much. We need her help against these <Unknowns> first.”
Hotaru frowned. “You’re a nice guy, aren’t you, Shino,” she said, sighing.
“Stop with the jokes.” He briefly averted his gaze away before suddenly remembering something important. Earlier, Maihime had mentioned Hotaru’s name, but he didn’t have a chance to question her about it. What was going on?
“… Hotaru,” he said after thinking about it for a few seconds.
“What?”
“Well, Maihime… she said— ” his voice was suddenly drowned out by the nearby shouts.
“Huh? What’d you say?”
“Ah… nothing, I’ll tell you later. Let’s hurry,” he said, suddenly breaking into a sprint.
“W-Wait!” shouted Hotaru. In a panic, she chased after him.
—
After splitting up with Shino, Maihime headed to where her beloved specialized weapon, “Eris,” was held. She could have carried it with her earlier on the date, but she felt like it wasn’t very ladylike to do so.
At that moment, her cell phone rang, so she stopped and searched for it inside her bag. It was a call from headquarters… she fumbled with the screen a bit and answered it.
“Huh?” All of a sudden, the phone was forcibly ripped from her hands, and weirdly enough, it began floating in the air around her.
“What the?” she shouted. She jumped at the phone to try to grab it back. However, the floating phone was too quick for her as it nimbly maneuvered around her hands.
“Stop!” she shouted. She had to answer that call from headquarters, so she frantically chased around for it. It continued to float away, leading her to some deserted place. Finally, it spun around playfully for a moment before stopping completely in midair.
Suddenly, the area around the cellphone blurred, and a person appeared from thin air.
Maihime’s eyes widened. “Kurisu?!?!?”
“Hehehe, were you surprised?” she said. She playfully waved her phone around once again.
“I was. If you were there, then you should have said something,” replied Maihime. “Oh, the <Unknowns> are here! A lot of them… So can I have my phone back? I need to contact headquarters.”
Kurisu grinned. “Cellphone? This right?” She dropped the cellphone onto the ground and crushed it completely with her foot.

“Huh? What was that for, Kurisu?!?”
“Hehehe, I’m sorry, Hime-sama,” snickered Kurisu. “But if you contact them now, it’ll be a bit troublesome for me. I won’t have an opportunity like this ever again.”
Maihime didn’t know what she was talking about, and her face showed it. “What are you saying?” she asked softly.
Kurisu didn’t respond. Instead, she grinned even harder and snapped her fingers. As she did, ten students silently appeared right behind Maihime, each holding their own specialized weapon. Even worse, they were on guard, ready to strike at a moment’s notice. It seemed Maihime had walked straight into a trap.
“Who are these people?” she asked suspiciously.
Once again, Kurisu ignored her question. She peered at Maihime with her now crazy eyes while pulling her own hair upward. “Sorry, but I’m gonna have you chill here for a bit…”
“What do you mean? I have to help fight the <Unknowns>!”
“Didn’t you hear what I just said?” said Kurisu, shrugging her shoulders. “It’ll be troublesome if you interfere with that. If you defeat that many <Unknowns>, you’ll get even more points, right? And with that, who knows how many years you’ll stay at the top of all of Kanto?”
She rubbed her chin. “You’re strong, aren’t you?” she said, pointing at her. “Despite that, even with your disgusting amount of points, you still won’t graduate and go inland. Because of that, some… people are going to come to you, you know? Perhaps, people like… the forever number two of Kanto… the Tokyo city head?”
“W-What are you saying? We have to work together and protect this— ”
“No, that’s not it,” interrupted Kurisu. “Not everyone’s as innocent and straightforward as you, you know? Rank one doesn’t offer a lot… Isn’t it so much more appealing to go inland?”
Maihime couldn’t believe what she was hearing, but she understood the situation. “Just to be sure, are you serious right now?” she asked, glaring back at Kurisu.
“Yes, I’m serious,” she replied. “Ah, but don’t worry… The head of Tokyo also wants to protect this country. Though, once you’re gone, Kanagawa’s gonna be in quite the pinch, and Tokyo’s gonna swoop in and save the day. It’s perfect! With this, Kanagawa gets saved, and Tokyo gets some much needed points. It’s a win-win situation, isn’t it?”
Before Maihime could answer, a low male voice behind her said, “Nabariya. You’ve said too much.”
“If Hime-sama doesn’t know what’s going on, it’ll be bad,” replied Kurisu as she waved him off. “It’s more scary if she went all out without us talking to her first. If she did, we’d already be dead.”
The Tokyo students all gulped in anticipation once she said that.
Maihime gritted her teeth together in frustration. She didn’t understand all the complicated stuff, but she knew that the people around her, including

the girl right in front of her, were putting the city at risk because of their own selfish reasons.
“So? You think I’m just going to do as you say?” snapped Maihime. “Or, you think you can hold me down here?”
“Absolutely not…” Kurisu grinned once again. “There’s no one in the world who can do that.”
Maihime angrily took a step forward, causing the Tokyo students to tremble in fear. Seeing this, Kurisu snapped her fingers one more time.
BOOM!
There was an explosion within the city, and a shockwave soon followed through, causing some birds to fly out in disarray.
“What the…?” Maihime instinctively looked towards the sound. She could see smoke rising between some buildings, and could hear a different kind of siren ringing in the distance. “Kurisu… what did you do?”
Kurisu laughed. “Well, I have lived here for quite a while, right? So that’s why I decided to leave some parting gifts…”
“KURISU!!!” shouted Maihime. She was so angry she had trouble holding her emotions in.
“Oh no… Don’t get so angry at me,” said Kurisu, playfully hugging herself. “If you make such a scary face, I might accidentally blow some more up, you know?”
Maihime got so angry she couldn’t speak. She just kept shooting daggers at her.
Kurisu, however, remained unfazed as she tried to hide her laughter.
“That’s why… just do what I say, okay? Don’t worry, I won’t make you do anything bad. Just hurry up, graduate, and go inland so you won’t be in the rankings anymore. Of course, don’t tell anyone anything…”
She paused. “Or perhaps you can try and fight your way out here, but of course you’ll know what’s gonna happen to the city, don’t you?”
“Damn it!” Maihime cried out in vain. She angrily stomped her foot down, cracking the pavement underneath.
However, she couldn’t do anything rash with the entirety of Kangawa taken as a hostage, so she sighed and put up her hands. The students behind her didn’t believe it at first, but soon slowly inched up to her. Once they were right behind her, one of the students took out a handcuff from his front pocket and handcuffed her.
“Ah no, no,” said Kurisu as she walked up to them. “That’s not gonna do anything… Leave this to me.”
She gently rubbed her hand against Maihime’s cheek.
“Huh?” Maihime rubbed her eyes confusingly. Her vision began to fade away… Soon, her vision went completely white, as if she was in some sort of empty space with only Kurisu in front of her. “What… is this? Kurisu… this is your <World>?”

Kurisu giggled. “When did I ever say my <World> was to make things invisible? With this, you won’t be able to see anyone else… but me. Sorry, Hime-sama, but you are going to run away from the battlefield, okay?” She finished with another deformed smile.

—

Having finally regrouped with the other students, Shino was waiting for further orders with his own small unit.

“Shino,” said Hotaru.

“What is it?”

The city now was even noisier than before, but it wasn’t from the energy and excitement of the students. No, right now, they were all scared to death. It was to be expected, however, since there had been an explosion just a few minutes earlier. Despite having been the only explosion so far, it was enough to make everyone anxious. Rumors of what may have happened already spread like wildfire, and many believed that the <Unknowns> had caused it.

“What’s going on here?” asked Shino. He narrowed his eyes trying to figure stuff out.

“Oh, Shinomiya,” said someone with a deep voice.

“Huh?” He turned around.

It was Sugiishi. “I feel much safer fighting with you,” he continued saying. “I saw that Ranked Battle… Man, you were scary, but I would have never imagined you to take down two of the Divine Pillars like that.”

“I just got lucky. But more importantly, what was that explosion?”

“That one, huh?” Sugiishi turned to where the explosion was in the distance. “It was in Block A. People are saying that Hime-sama’s dorm had smoke coming out of it. If it was an <Unknown> attack, then it’s weird that there hadn’t been any more explosions. At the same time, I doubt it’s a coincidence. Right now, they’re probably still trying to figure out what caused it. I mean, it’s not like Hime-sama messed up while cooking and blew the whole thing up or anything like that…”

“I see, but at this rate, the students are going to start losing their morale. What— ”

SSSSSHHHHHHHHHHHIIIIIIIIIIIINOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!

Before he could finish his sentence, Shino heard someone scream his name out.

Sugiishi looked around, chuckling. “Woah, what’s this? You got fans already? Why don’t you wave back, Shino? It’s important to keep up your… WOAH!”

[Aegis] suddenly jumped down from a nearby building onto Sugiishi’s head, pushing him face first into the ground.

“I finally found you, Shino!” she said.

“Sajihara?” Shino eyed her suspiciously. Soon after, he noticed a small shadow appear in front of him as well— it was [Silent].

“Don’t run away anymore please answer this where did Hime-sama go we know you were with her the entire day,” she said. This time she was grabbing the panda by its collar.
“Tenkawa… what do you mean?” replied Shino.
“Are you seriously saying this?” snapped Ginko. “You brought Hime-sama out, didn’t you? She’s not responding on her cell phone, and I can’t smell her, so what happened? We took our eyes off her for one second, and now she’s gone!”
Zakuro was just as annoyed as Ginko was. “Exactly you kidnapped her or something didn’t you after all that the clothes shop the café the downtown shopping and even brought home some of her homemade rice-balls I actually can’t forgive you for doing all that!”
“Yeah!” said Ginko. “You took advantage of her to even use her straw! I’m so damn jealous…! So jealous it hurts!”
Shino raised his eyebrows. “How did you two know that?”
“That’s not important!”
“Exactly don’t try to change the subject,” said Zakuro.
Shino felt like he wasn’t getting the whole picture, so he quietened up. Besides, there was something more important he had to ask.
“So what’s going on?” he asked. “Tenkawa hasn’t returned yet? It’s true I was with her earlier, but we went our separate ways after we got back to the city. I don’t know where she went after that.”
The two (or rather, Ginko and the panda) looked at each other for a split second before turning back to Shino.
“That true?”
“Then where is Hime-sama there’s absolute no way she would run away from battle,” said Zakuro, her lips trembling.
Ginko sighed and took out her cellphone from her front pocket. “Hey, this is Sajihara… Sorry I missed your call, I was busy looking for Hime-sama. So, have you found out where she is…?”
The voice from the cellphone was loud enough that everyone could hear it. Please come to back to headquarters! It’s terrible! Tenkawa… was kidnapped!
Ginko gasped as she threw a dirty look at Shino, and Zakuro did the same with her panda.
“I knew it… It’s you, isn’t it? Shino!” screamed Ginko.
“You’ve gone and done it you monster now tell me what did you do to Hime-sama choose your next words very carefully.”
“As I’ve said, I— ”
From the line, Aoi suddenly cut him off. “Huh? Is that Shinomiya’s voice I hear?”
“Ah, don’t worry about it Aoi,” said Ginko, “I’ll take him in and— ”
“N-No!” interrupted Aoi once again. “Shinomiya isn’t the culprit… it’s someone else!”
“No way!” said Zakuro in disbelief. Both Ginko and her face went blank.

“In any case, just come! We need everyone’s help for this…”
“O-Okay, I’ll come at once,” said Ginko, taking one last look at Shino. “Sorry for suspecting you… seems you’re in the clear for now.”
“It’s no big deal.” Shino shook his head. “But… take me with you.”
“Huh?” Ginko raised her eyebrows. It was an odd request; Shino wasn’t the culprit, but he wasn’t anyone important, much less a member of headquarters.
Despite that, Shino had to go. He felt that if he went, he could get closer to understanding the reasoning behind Maihime’s assassination order, perhaps even from the other people currently targeting her as well.
“……..” In the midst of all his thoughts, Shino shook his head no. The reason for going was simple… Shino had to be the one who killed her.
“What are you saying this is none of your— ”
“Actually,” interrupted Aoi through the phone. “Please have Shinomiya come too… We need everyone’s help in this, especially his. You two fought him directly, so you should already know his strength…”
“I guess so…” said Ginko. Both she and Zakuro quietened up. They didn’t seem to approve, but Aoi was not wrong, so they had no choice but to agree.
“Understood. Come with us, Shino.”
“Yeah,” he nodded, clenching his fist in resolve.
At that moment, Sugiishi, who was still trapped under Ginko’s feet, said, “Umm… I’m sorry for bothering you all… but can you move aside please?” He was clearly in pain.
“Ah, sorry.” Ginko casually scratched her head before eventually stepping off of his head.
“Kurisu is a spy from Tokyo??” The three stared on in disbelief.
In the central headquarters room under Kangawa Academy, Aoi briefed them on the information they had so far. The three couldn’t believe that Kurisu, a Divine Pillar, would go against Maihime to further the ranks of another city’s head. She even went as far as to take Maihime and even the city hostage to do it.
“Kurisu Nabariya, huh?”
“I can’t believe it Kurisu is a spy what’s going on…” said Zakuro.
“Plus,” said Ginko. “You said she set up the bombs around the city, and taken everyone, including Hime-sama, hostage? Taking advantage of Hime-sama’s kindness like that… what a damn coward…”
The two angrily grunted at the thought of Kurisu betraying them. She was a longtime friend of theirs, yet she committed the ultimate sin of betrayal. She even had the nerve to do it during a massive <Unknown> attack, making the situation ten times worse.
“I didn’t want to believe it, but it’s the truth,” Aoi said bitterly.
There was a brief pause before Zakuro and Ginko spoke up again.
“In any case let’s search of Hime-sama.”

“Yeah. But… Since I can’t smell her, she probably isn’t in the city. And if she’s outside the city… things become difficult… she may even be taken to Tokyo…”
Shino shook his head. “No, that’s not it,” he interrupted. “Other than Zakuro’s <World>, I find it hard to believe that she would be out of the city already or any place outside Sajihara’s scent range. Instead, she probably erased her scent somehow and is hidden somewhere within the city. If that’s the case, looking for her outside the city is just going to be a waste of time.”
“Ughhhh…” grunted Ginko.
Zakuro nodded. “I’ll look for her I do have a marking on pretty much every place I’ve been to so I can look within the city or even any point from here to Tokyo pretty well…”
“That may be true, but the chance of you finding her like that is extremely low,” explained Shino, “and it’ll take too much time. The <Unknowns> are coming, and it’ll be tough to have both you and Tenkawa away from battle. We can’t leave Kanagawa for dead just to save her.”
Zakuro winced and hugged her panda.
“How long until the <Unknowns> reach their first target?”
“A-About fifteen minutes.”
“That is indeed not a lot of time well then I guess I’ll fight off the <Unknowns> then look for Hime-sama since it makes more sense that way.”
“That might work too… But in this case, Tenkawa’s presence is necessary to raise everyone’s morale for battle. Without her leadership, the battle could be a disaster. Also, even if we repelled this attack, I’m sure Kurisu will be long gone by then. It’s a lose-lose situation…”
Ginko and Zakuro just stared silently back at him.
“So in other words, there’s only one option, right?” Ginko finally ended up saying. “We save Hime-sama in fifteen minutes, and then defend the city right after…?”
Zakuro butted in nervously. “We still have to worry about the bombs placed around the city too…”
“Yup, that about sums it up,” nodded Aoi. She spoke briefly but desperately. She wasn’t the only one like this— far from it. All the students in the room were nervously fidgeting around as they groaned in despair. They needed a plan immediately… right now they were already wasting precious time. However, as time started to run out, their anxiety went through the roof. It was evident just from looking at them that they weren’t in their best mental states.
Shino rubbed his chin. He was probably the calmest person in the room. Maihime Tenkawa had much more of an impact on the city than he had previously thought. Many of the student’s faces were filled with confusion and disarray, and it was amusing to think that they probably weren’t even capable of rational thoughts at the moment.

In reality, Shino had found a much simpler way to resolve this mess.
“There is a way here,” he said, catching everyone’s attention.
“W-What do you mean?”
“We’ve been all wrapped up around the notion of saving Tenkawa that we haven’t been seeing the bigger picture. We need to think about Kurisu Nabariya… which I’m sure you all have at some point. That’s why… we need to rethink our approach. It’s okay if we don’t save Tenkawa.”
Ginko’s face tightened up. “What are you saying? Saving Hime-sama should be our first priority!”
“Exactly that shouldn’t even be up for debate do you even know how important she is right now,” muttered Zakuro.
Shino calmed them down and continued to explain. “Just hear me out on this. Besides, what do you even mean by saving her? Is it finding out where she’s been taken to, taking down Nabariya, and freeing her?”
“Of course!”
“But seriously, is that even necessary? Do you really think mere steel or anything like that can hold her down? Is she that weak that she can’t break out by herself?”
The others finally seemed to see what Shino was getting to.
“Exactly. What we should be doing is taking care of what’s really holding her down. Once we can do that, she can easily break away by herself.”
“S-So you’re saying that we need to disarm the bombs around the city within fifteen minutes? That’s not doable…” Aoi stopped midsentence as she caught on.
A second later, Ginko and Zakuro did the same. Everyone must have realized it now… Right now, that sort of thing was doable.
Shino nodded. “Let’s go, Divine Pillars. It’s time to teach her a lesson.”
—
Shino, Zakuro, Ginko, and Aoi left headquarters and headed up to the roof. Since the academy was in the middle of the city, they were able to get a good view of the coastline.
The students had taken up their formation along the coast. Not long after, a low rumbling sound could be heard as platforms, belonging to the students in the beach unit that had been tasked with preventing the <Unknowns> from going ashore, started to rise from the ocean. The forward units went out as well, but they went much further out into the ocean.
The <Unknowns> were now so close; their shadows were much larger than what the students had seen before. Judging from their distance, it wasn’t long before they reached the predetermined engagement area.
“Sajihara, do it!” shouted Aoi, holding her hair down against the sea breeze.
Ginko slid her scarf off down her face, closed her eyes, and sniffed all around her. Sniff. Sniff. Sniff. She was like a wine taster enjoying the fine fragrance of the different flavors.
“How is it, Sajihara?” asked Shino.
Ginko poked her face a few times before opening her eyes.

“Yeah… East twelve units, west ten, south eight, and north ten. There are three inside the school, which makes a total of forty-three of them. These really shouldn’t be a problem, but I did catch Kurisu’s scent and the lingering smell of explosives… So she really did set this up, huh…” she said irritatedly. She reached a hand out to Aoi. “Well, let’s share the locations.”
“Sure!” She grabbed onto Ginko’s hand.
“What are you doing?” asked Shino.
“Just wait a bit,” replied Aoi. She closed her eyes and concentrated on her inner spirit.
A few seconds later, strange visions started to appear in Shino’s mind.
“What…?” he said in awe. He was seeing a bird’s eye view of the city with multiple areas marked with a red dot. He glanced at Aoi, who nodded in return.
“I can take the things from Sajihara’s head and share it with everyone,” she explained. “This way is so much faster than trying to describe it with words, right?”
“So this is your <World>…” Using this, information could be sent to the front lines in an instant. Shino finally understood why she was worthy of the title of a Divine Pillar.
“In that case since we know where the areas are I’m going,” said Zakuro. She kicked the ground and took off.
“Otonashi, wait!” Shino tried to stop her, but it was already too late. Zakuro had already disappeared.
A short while later, she reappeared back to her original spot. “It took a while to find it actually but is this what it is?” she asked. She held out her hand to them without even a glance in their direction. Despite doing so, they didn’t see anything in the palm of her hand.
However, Shino felt something like a solid box the moment he reached for it. It was no doubt one of Kurisu’s bombs.
“That was close, Otonashi,” said Shino as he kept feeling around the box.
“What do you mean?”
“If this was a pressure activated bomb, you would have died right there on the spot.”
Zakuro shuddered.
In any case, these were bombs that had been set up quite a long time ago within the city. Shino knew that it wouldn’t be wise to have them detonate just from something as simple as a touch. He knew it, but he decided to scare her a bit for her own good.
“But hey, it’s nice that we know it’s not pressure based since you just touched it. It would take so much longer if we actually had to analyze it. So excellent work, Otonashi,” he said sarcastically, “I commend you on your bravery.”
“S-Shut it,” replied Zakuro. She awkwardly pulled her hood over her eyes.
Ginko sniffed at the object. “Ah, I see,” she said. “Smelling it at this distance… I can tell there were a few that I missed. There are well over

forty of these around the city… Still, I can't believe I didn't notice her setting them up…"
They didn't know how long Kurisu took to place everything, but it was strange that Ginko didn't notice any peculiar scents during that time.
"Perhaps Kurisu's <World> isn't to make things invisible," said Shino. "But rather, she can make things unperceivable."
"Huh?"
"It's not that she has the ability to make things camouflaged, so to speak…" he reiterated. "It's that she can literally take away our ability to recognize them. Of course, it's not limited to just vision… I'm sure she can fool our other senses as well."
Ginko angrily clenched her teeth. Shino had a very reasonable explanation, and it didn't seem far from the truth.
"If that's the case, then how come I can see it right now?" asked Ginko.
"There's a taste of Kurisu's scent on it, too."
"In the end it's only a hypothesis… Though, I'm sure there's some sort of time limit, or even her <World> itself may be limited. If that's the case, then she could be using her <World> to hide something else right now… something more important than these bombs."
Aoi's eyes lit up. Right now, there was something that Kurisu wanted hidden from Ginko… That something had to be Maihime herself. Going by that logic, if Kurisu wanted to hide Maihime, that meant that they were still within Ginko's search range and thus still within the city.
Their eyes lit up upon figuring this out.
However, this wasn't the time to get careless. "In any case, we must get rid of all the explosives— fast," said Shino. "Yaegaki, share this information with everyone in the city, and have them split up and collect the easy to get ones."
"G-Got it."
"Sajihara and I will find the explosives in the school. And also, Otonashi… you've got markings in the city, right?"
"Of course not a place is out of my reach," replied Zakuro.
"Nice. Ten of them are in places that are relatively hard to get into, so it's your job to collect them."
"I don't like that you are giving instructions but roger that since it's for Hime-sama's sake."
Shino locked eyes with Aoi, Ginko, and Zakuro's panda. Once he gave the nod, they all dispersed to do their respective duties.
—
With the imminent <Unknown> attack and the mysterious explosions going around the city, Hotaru joined the ranks of the worried students trying to figure out what was going on. Right after the explosions, two of the four Divine Pillars had suddenly met up with Shino. He did tell her not to worry about it before heading off, but that didn't really calm her down. She knew there was always the danger of having their real intentions exposed.

“That’s why I’ve been telling him to keep a low profile…” she muttered to herself. There was no point in saying it now, but she just had to get it out. Shino was an excellent agent, but he just needed to be a bit more considerate about certain situations.
At that moment, a voice appeared within her head.
Everyone, this is Yaegaki.
“Huh?” Hotaru felt a strange sensation as she heard Aoi’s voice echo inside her head.
In any case, please calm down. As of right now, we have identified multiple bombs placed around the city.
“What?” Hotaru instinctively held her breath. The students around her also seemed to get the same message. Some of the students were in shock while others had frozen in fear.
If you are hearing this voice, then that means you are near one of the bombs. They are invisible, so you won’t be able to see them. However, I’m going to share you their locations, so please retrieve it as fast as possible.
Aoi went on to explain some of the bomb’s special characteristics. She ended by showing them a rough sketch of where it was.
“Wow…”
“Oh, is this your first time experiencing Aoi’s telepathy?” said a nearby boy. Hotaru recognized the voice… it was Sugiishi.
“Yeah… what’s going on?” she replied.
“Exactly what she said, I guess. I don’t know the details, but it looks like Kanagawa’s in quite the pinch. We just got the map… so let’s do some treasure hunting, shall we?”
“S-So it really was an explosive? If we mishandle it, aren’t we all gonna blow up? Aren’t you afraid?”
“Of course I’m afraid… is that even a question?” He shrugged his shoulders. “But if I peace out now, I’ll never be able to look Hime-sama in the eye ever again.” He smiled briefly before taking off to the marked spot on the map. Without any hesitation, the other students dashed to the location as well.
“Ughh… Fine! What’s wrong with you students!” Hotaru said frustratingly. She kicked the ground in disgust.
—
The great search had begun. From the rear, Aoi kept transmitting the locations of the bombs to the students near them. The students were quite surprised to suddenly hear her voice within their heads, but they understood that time was of the essence. They promptly took up their arms and moved out.
A few minutes later, Shino and Ginko finished retrieving the various bombs placed around the school. They then went back to the rooftop where Aoi was waiting. Once there, Ginko took a big sniff once again.
“Nice, bomb number forty three and forty four had been moved,” she said. “It seemed like everyone found the bombs quite smoothly.”
“What about the last one?”

“Seems like Zakuro’s finding it right now,” she paused, “Yeah, it’s moving right now. She found it!”
Aoi breathed a sigh of relief. “It looks like everyone made it in time,” she said. “We just have to deactivate them and then— ”
“——————————————————————————————-!”
At that very moment, a frightening roar came accompanied with sirens all around.
“What the?” Aoi held her breath.
Everyone looked out towards the ocean. The sound seemed to come from the <Unknowns>… Before any of them had noticed, the Triton class came barreling down with its own forces towards the forward units.
“What?? This is way too early!” shouted Ginko. The <Unknowns> were heading to the intercept point faster than anticipated, making her uneasy.
Tsk. Shino glanced at Aoi. “Alright,” he said. “Yaegaki, connect to all the students currently holding the bombs. Tell them to just throw them high up into the air.”
“Huh? But if they do that…”
“There’s no time. Just do it,” he said sternly.
Aoi looked around hesitantly before closing her eyes in a panic.
E-Everyone… I’m going to give a signal in a few moments, and when I do, please throw the bomb you’re holding into the sky!
Aoi paused, but eventually continued.
Alright? Get Ready! Three… Two… One… NOW!
All at once, the students threw up the bombs as if they were in some kind of shotput event. Using their respective auras, they threw them with such power that the bombs went flying up into the sky.
Speaking of which, the bombs were still invisible to the naked eye. Even though all of them were in the air, Shino couldn’t see anything above him but the blue sky. He could make out traces of the bag Zakuro used to carry the bombs in his peripheral vision, though that was about it.
He knew of this from the moment they met, yet he was once again reminded of the fact that Kurisu Nabariya’s <World> hard countered his.
“S-Shinomiya!” shouted Aoi.
Shino narrowed his vision and took up a low stance. He once again grabbed his sword as if he was putting all of his energy into a single swing. It was true that he couldn’t see the things he wanted to cut. Despite that, he didn’t care.
“It’ll be no problem if I cut everything,” he whispered to himself. He thrusted his entire body upwards into a spin, taking in the entire sky into his vision.
Indeed, at that very moment, he “saw” the sky. The blade on his sword let out a flash of light as he pulled it out of the sheath. The moment he finished his swing, the sky lit up in explosions all around him. Yes, it was true that he couldn’t see the bombs, but he knew that they were all up in the air. If

that was the case, then all he had to do was to create a “web” that could catch all of them… a web that could cut the sky indiscriminately.
A huge bang soon followed, echoing across the sky as far as the eye could see. It was so loud that even Aoi and Ginko screamed out in shock.
Shino ensured that there were no causalities from his swing before slowly sheathing his sword.
Hehehe…
Kurisu giggled at Maihime in ecstasy. Maihime was clearly frustrated with her hands tied up and her vision stolen. Two Tokyo students stood guard off to her side.
They were in a hidden dorm inside Kanagawa, but it didn’t matter to her since she couldn’t see anything. The only thing visible to her was Kurisu and Kurisu alone.
Kurisu’s <World> toyed around with the prospect of object recognition. She wasn’t just limited to inanimate objects, though… With just a touch, she also had the ability to completely disable people’s ability to recognize the things around them.
Of course, the people in the room made sure to cover their scent. There was no way Ginko was going to find this place no matter how hard she tried.
What’s left was just for them to wait until Kanagawa’s inevitable demise and for them to swoop in and save the day. They would then mix in with the Tokyo forces and sneak away undetected.
“I’m sorry for that, but I had to take you in quickly,” laughed Kurisu.
“Ginko’s nose is quite scary, you know?”
In any case, seeing how Maihime couldn’t recognize her surroundings, it didn’t matter where she was. She could be in her favorite café for all she knew.
Maihime glared back at Kurisu.
“Oh my, don’t make such a scary face at me,” Kurisu said sarcastically.
“Make use of your cute face, okay? It’s come to this, but you really are my favorite person.”
In order to cause Maihime’s downfall, Kurisu inconspicuously clawed her way up to become a Divine Pillar. Using her <World>, she focused on monitoring Maihime’s every move… yet it would be a lie to say that she wasn’t drawn in to her after all this time. Maihime Tenkawa was the real deal, after all. No one else in the world possessed her strength and leadership abilities. All the students in Kanagawa, including the other Divine Pillars, slowly realized this fact as they got to know her better.

That’s exactly why she was in such ecstasy. Kurisu wasn’t more powerful than the other Divine Pillars, but right now she had complete control over Maihime and of the situation.
“You know, once this mission is over, I’m going to graduate early and head inland,” she said, once again running her fingers gently along Maihime’s cheeks. “I’m getting the head’s approval for even more special rewards, of course. Let’s get along well inland, Hime-sama.”
“Shut your mouth!” snapped Maihime.
But that only caused Kurisu to laugh even harder, this time laughing so hard her back started twitching. Unable to bear the sight of her madness, the Tokyo students around her awkwardly looked away.
“You can’t be saying that,” said Kurisu. “With you under my <World>, you can’t see or hear anything but me, right? Of course, that includes Aoi’s telepathy as well. So, if I’m in a bad mood, I can put you in solitary confinement… forever. I wonder how long you’ll stay sane? Did you know? A death from solitude is far worse than a physical death. Maybe you should experience it for yourself!”
She gently raised Maihime’s chin before continuing. “That’s why… just say this to me: Kurisu owns me; I’m her property. With someone as innocent and as pure as you are… say these words to me. These humiliating words you’ve never once said in your life. Swear to me… or else, you know what’s going to happen, right?”
Maihime scowled. “Don’t fuck with me, you degenerate. Kill me? You think I can get taken down by some trash like you?”
“Well then,” said Kurisu gleefully. “I guess you asked for it.” She went to touch Maihime’s forehead with her index finger.
At that moment, however, there was a tremendous explosion in the sky.
“What?” Kurisu’s voice trailed off. Her head was suddenly throbbing with pain… she felt like her brain was turning into mush. She had to take a moment to compose herself through the pain before she finally understood what was going on. Someone had forcibly detonated all her bombs, since she felt the intense feedback of having that many objects in her <World> destroyed at once.
The sharp pain made her lose concentration, causing her <World> to fade away. And when it did…
“……!” Maihime suddenly looked around. Her senses were starting to come back to her, and she got an idea of what had happened.
Seeing this, Kurisu’s face turned pale. Perhaps she had just realized what was about to happen. “H-Hey!” she said trembling as she retreated backwards. “T-Take care of— ”
It was too late. Maihime, who had been passive until now, suddenly thrusted her arms out. As she did, the metal handcuffs on her just ripped apart like paper. Her hands hit the nearby wall, brushing against Kurisu’s face in the process.

“Ughh….” A second later, the students finally reacted to her moves. They brought out their weapons in a futile attempt to try to take her down.
“Take this!!” screamed Maihime. Using her bare hands, she took down the students around her. Her movements weren’t actually too different from a child during its tantrum, but she was certainly no child.
As wild as she was, Maihime easily took care of the students. From having their jaws broken or their ribs cracked, the students were dropping like flies. One student was even hit so hard that he flew out the window and slammed into the ground.
Maihime didn’t even break a sweat. With the sun shining down on her through the window, she stood calmly in the midst of the carnage she just caused.
Kurisu, on the other hand, trembled at the sight of her, though she quickly composed herself and began to think of a way out. The handcuffs had been destroyed… Taking her to Tokyo would be near impossible… All the explosions she had planted had been taken care of… But, if it’s Maihime, then there may be a way to trick□
Before she could think any further, someone thrusted a blade at her neck, almost as if to cut her thoughts away. The death god had come for her life.
“You’ve gone and done it haven’t you Kurisu do you want to die or do you want to die in the most paintful way possible I’ll actually let you choose.” Zakuro suddenly appeared behind Kurisu, forcing her raise her arms up in defeat.
—
It hadn’t even been two minutes before they were able to neutralize all the bombs. Zakuro returned with Maihime in her arms□ it was all thanks to Ginko that she was able to find her.
“Hime-sama!” shouted Ginko. She was half crying at the sight of seeing her. Aoi joined in as well as the two made a mad dash for her. “Tenkawa!”
“Sorry I made you all worry…”
“No way!” said Ginko. “That’s not something you should apologize for!”
“Exactly!” shouted Aoi. Looking at Zakuro, she suddenly thought of something. “Ah, Otonashi, where’s Nabariya?”
Zakuro averted her eyes from Aoi. “I wanted to destroy her but Hime-sama stopped me so for now I just tied her up and stashed her in the barracks real quick we can decide on what to do with her later but more importantly…” In the midst of her sentence, Zakuro disappeared.
About ten seconds later, she returned holding a large sword in her right hand and a bag containing Maihime’s uniform in her left.
“… There are things we must take care of.”
Zakuro stared out to the horizon upon saying that.
“Yeah… Exactly. Thanks, Zakuro,” said Maihime. She took out her large overcoat from the bag and flung it around her shoulders. She too looked out as she took her sword.

In the meantime, Ginko had already transformed. “Well then, let’s go too,” she said, nodding.
“As a leader it’s too shameful for me not to be on the battlefield,” agreed Zakuro.
Maihime nodded as well. “Take care. I’ll be out there soon enough.”
Ginko and Zakuro quickly spoke to Shino before leaving.
“It hurts me to say this, but take care of Hime-sama, Shino.”
“Yeah it really hurts me too but I see that you are quite skilled so please don’t let anyone lay a finger on her.”
“You two…” said Shino halfheartedly, but it was too late. Ginko had already leapt out and Zakuro vanished into thin air.
“Yeah, take care of me, please,” joked Maihime.
Shino reluctantly sighed. She just unknowingly asked the person who came to kill her to take care of her. Well, of course she wouldn’t have known that.
“Aoi… Let me talk to them?”
“Sure,” replied Aoi, reaching out her hand.
Maihime grabbed onto her hand, took a deep breath, and shouted, “WE ARE THE SWORDS OF THIS CITY!”
Shino heard her voice from both his ears and inside his head. In response, the students in the front lines and in the city yelled out to hype themselves up.
“We are in perilous times, my friends,” she continued. “There’s a lot of those <Unknowns> out there. However, we will neither falter nor retreat, for we have no place to go but forward. There will be madness… And there will *not* be cowardliness We will not fall back.”
At the end of her speech, Maihime gave a little grin. “Okay? How’s that? Sounds fun, right?”
The students all cheered once more.
“Alright! Let’s show them what we’ve got! In this fight, they’ll come to understand our pride! Our power! And our resolve!”
OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!
The student’s cheers were so loud this time it shook the air around them, just like how the <Unknown’s> roar did earlier. The very same students who had been frightened by them and the random explosion were now more pumped than ever to charge into battle.
Maihime, now satisfied with her little speech, nodded as she turned her attention to the Triton class, who seemed to split the ocean apart with just its presence.
“Let’s go too, Shino.”
“Hmph! Fine. I’ll accompany you just this one time.”
Maihime smiled. “Alright, nice. Let’s go save the world one more time today.”
The two leapt off the roof towards the battlefield.
—

It was now 2:40 PM. The battle between the humans and the <Unknowns> was about to begin near what was once Yokohama. Shino stood a bit behind the predetermined intercept point where Kraken class <Unknowns> came into view.
From the looks of it, the Kraken class <Unknowns> were about twenty meters tall, with its overall size similar to that of a cruiser. Their backs were filled with disfigured and swelled lumps, which seemed to move around before being fired off. Soon, the lumps quickly took on their humanoid forms.
They were similar to the others in that it was hard to tell if they were biological or mechanical. However, from the looks of it, they did seem to be the mothers of the <Unknowns>, or maybe just their transport carriers, depending on what they were viewed as.
The forward unit of the <Unknowns> consisted of ten Kraken classes and 400 Ogre classes. Ginko and Zakuro's units combined had about 200 students, so they were at a disadvantage strictly from a numbers point of view.
But the students were able to see something that the previous generations could not… their <Worlds>. Without it, they could hardly put up a fight. With it, they could win.
Ginko and Zakuro's units began the attack. Some students were riding on blocks floating above the sea, while others were straight up running on water. The students went for flanks around the Kraken classes.
Of course, the <Unknowns> didn't just sit idly by while the students approached. The Kraken classes released their arm-like things that expanded at the tips as they went to crush the students buzzing around the ocean. Furthermore, more and more humanoid <Unknowns> dispersed from their backs just as the students got close enough for hand-to-hand combat.
In an instant, the calm ocean had turned into a violent battlefield. The various auras from the students brightly illuminated the ocean, while the <Unknowns> shot out their bullet-like things with a thunderous roar.
"Hey, Shino," said Maihime. She stood a bit off to the side of Ginko's troops, and like many others, she was using a block to traverse the ocean.
"What is it?"
"It just came to me that I forgot to thank you… I heard everything from Zakuro. Shino… you led the others to help save me, right?"
Shino gazed out at the <Unknowns>. "I just happened to come across the situation," he said, unsheathing his sword. Far off in the distance, the very front liners had already began lopping off the heads of the <Unknowns>.
As he peered out, an image of the entire ocean battlefield suddenly popped into his head. From it, he was able to know the positions of both the students and the <Unknowns>. It was probably from Aoi… she must have returned back to headquarters and shared the state of the battle with everyone.

“So? What’d you think about my city?” asked Mahime.
“… It’s not bad,” he replied. “The forward units bravely dashed into battle, and from the back Yaegaki shared some important information. Kanagawa is quite powerful.”
Shino didn’t know how many people Aoi could communicate with at once, but even if she was limited to just a handful of people, that in itself was a huge advantage in the field of battle. Both Ginko and Zakuro fully abused that power. Ginko went all out jumping to spots with the highest density of <Unknowns>, and Zakuro did the same with her speed and quickness. It must have been quite difficult for the <Unknowns> just to fight the two of them.
“Exactly! Everyone… I’m so proud of them. They’re all my trusted friends.”
“Ah, but…” Shino focused on the image in his head. Everything was going smoothly so far… but in the far back, a one hundred meter Triton class <Unknown> approached ominously. It’s body was so extraordinarily large that it reminded Shino of a destroyer. Its size easily dwarfed the already large Kraken classes, and it had lumps in its skin as well, presumably humanoid <Unknowns>.
The Triton class was just on a whole new level in terms of strength. There really weren’t any efficient ways of killing it, and it seemed like the outcome of this battle relied solely on whether or not they could take it down, but that’s exactly why Shino and Maihime were positioned where they were.
“I’ll give you your space. You should have no problems with that, right?” said Shino.
“Of course not!”
“Alright, then go wild,” said Shino. “Just do your thing— you don’t have to worry about anything other than that. I’ll back you up.”
“Okay!” nodded Maihime.
Shino took a good look at the humanoid <Unknowns> packed tightly in front of him. *Tsk.* He drew up his aura and his sword began to light up. A single swing of his sword sent out over a hundred slashes at once, and he instantly cut down the <Unknowns> in his field of view.
Despite the many <Unknowns> in the sky, Shino was successful in clearing out a path. Maihime took this opportunity and slipped right into the newly created empty space. Shino did the same, following her by jumping on both the blocks and the bodies of the dead <Unknowns>.
Soon, the two pulled ahead of the front lines and stood face to face with what had to be the enemy’s general… the Triton class. Even worse, there was a field of <Unknowns> next to it. There were so many Shino didn’t even bother counting them. Despite that, and the fact that he was only with Maihime, Shino surprisingly felt no fear at all.
He felt confident in not only his own power, but in Maihime’s as well. In that moment, he felt invincible with her.
Tsk. Shino suddenly frowned. Maihime Tenkawa was supposed to be the person he was going to kill. He knew this, but he had grown fond of her

presence. Before he knew it, he no longer felt any malice towards her, and he certainly didn't want to hurt, much less kill, her.
"Shino!" Maihime felt invincible as well. She grinned and jumped towards the Triton class. Countless <Unknowns> quickly dashed in front of her.
"Don't even try, you monsters. You fools don't even have the right to go against her." Shino took another good look at them. With his sword once again glowing brightly, he sent slashes to both the Ogre classes and the Triton class <Unknown> simultaneously.
A bunch of <Unknowns> were once again instantly killed, and their dead bodies dropped into the ocean. However, Shino's attack did at most minimal damage to the Triton class, who just seemed to brush it off. Even if Shino's *Utsuhami* could reach it, he knew that it was lacking power to do any significant damage.
The Triton class's armor was too tough. There was no way he could take it down alone. From the moment he felt his attack hit though, Shino knew… He knew that there was someone else around that could break through it.
"TAKE THIS!!!!!!!!!!" Because of Shino's support, Maihime got a clear shot to it. She tore off a chunk of its armor with a swing of her big sword. However, even she wasn't powerful enough to take it down in one hit. It shot out multiple arms from its body in response and went for its own attack.
Maihime quickly jumped out of the way and defended herself against the incoming arms. Shino anticipated her movements and supported her with strikes of his own. They continued to put on the pressure like this, and after a while, they were slowly but surely damaging it.
Of course, this was the first time that Shino and Maihime actually fought together like this. They both had the same information sent over from Aoi, but not once did they plan their attacks out with each other. Usually, this would never end well, but somehow their movements were perfectly synchronized. They were like long lost twins, or maybe even friends who had not seen each other for over ten years…
"You're amazing, Shino! This is the first time I've done such a thing!" Maihime shouted cheerfully after their many attacks.
"That's a given," said Shino. *How long do you think I've observed you for?* Shino had been observing Maihime so much that she even appeared regularly in his dreams. It was no surprise that Shino could predict Maihime's every move.
"Alright, going one more time!" Maihime kicked off and swung at the Triton class once again. Her attack tore off another large portion of its armor, revealing weird mixes of both metal and organic matter inside.
Needless to say, it let out a wild shriek. Some gas-like substances began to emit from its wound that went straight for Maihime.
"What the—" she shouted. She didn't have time to fully react as she frantically tried to cover her face. She could feel her energy slip away, and she soon tumbled down into the ocean.

“Tenkawa!” Shino’s heart sank. Without thinking, he made a mad leap towards her, but an <Unknown> got in his way. It didn’t matter much though, as he quickly crushed it with one hand.
Luckily, Maihime had dropped onto a block instead of straight into the water, but the Triton class wasn’t done with her yet. This time, a single gigantic armored arm stretched out from its body.
“Damn!” shouted Shino. His eyebrows twitched unconsciously. With his strength, there was no way he could cut down the arm in time. He hesitated, and in that moment, the arm went straight for the kill. It seemed that the Triton class had its sights on Maihime all along.
Shino cursed in anger. He sheathed his sword back before jumping straight at it. He had to use it, but it was the only move he didn’t want to use. It was his trump card to end all trump cards… his final move that was meant to kill Maihime.
Speaking of which, the whole situation was pretty messed up. Shino didn’t even need to move a muscle. If he just let this Triton class do its thing, he would be able to accomplish his mission without casting any suspicion to himself.
But, what was this feeling? His body instinctively jumped towards the Triton class the moment he saw Maihime in trouble. He was ready to use it.
“*Art of the Longsword 3: Chigasane*,” he whispered. He pulled out his sword in one swift motion for an attack. This was his ultimate move, but what he did was just a regular slash. Its power didn’t increase, and as expected, it only did a minimal amount of damage to the Triton class.
With that being said, his technique wasn’t just limited to one slash.
“HAHHHHHHHHHH!” Shino’s sword began to glow brighter and brighter. It was true that a single slash didn’t have much effect on its armor. However, if he repeated that slash for a thousand or more times in the exact same spot and at the exact same time, then clearly the result would be different. *Chigasane*… there was no one in the world who could stop it. It was, quite literally, an unstoppable attack.
The Triton class’s armor broke away in an instant. Shino aimed for the root of the arm, or the bow if it was a ship, and cleanly sliced it off. When he was done, his sword couldn’t handle the burden of the attack, so it crumbled into little pieces.
Tsk. Shino had anticipated this. He tossed what was remaining of his weapon and swooped up Maihime just in time. If he had jumped out a split second later, the portion he had just cut off would have crushed them. Instead, it dropped into the ocean with an explosive splash.
“Tenkawa! Are you okay?” he shouted.
“Yeah… sorry about this,” she said with a weak smile. “It’s my bad…” She wasn’t wounded, but her eyes were swelled to the point where she couldn’t even open them.

Despite Shino's ultimate move, the fight was far from over. Even though he had sliced what looked to be its head straight off, it screamed from somewhere in its body and began to go wild.
Shino's eyes widened just looking at it. Even though the <Unknowns> were truly mysterious, he didn't think that there was anything out there that could still live without its head.
Without his weapon and Maihime's ability to see, the two were truly in a dire situation. There was only one thing left he could do.
"…Tenkawa. Can you still use your weapon?" he asked.
"Yeah I can…" she said warily. "It's just that my eyes won't open, so it'll be hard to hit anything…"
"Don't worry. I'll lend you my eyes… they're special."
"Huh?"
"It's okay," said Shino, grabbing onto both of her shoulders. "All you have to do is to swing that sword. Everything beyond that is on me… If it can be seen, it can be hit."
Like always, Shino focused on seeing the target. He could touch whatever he saw… but his <World> wasn't just limited to himself.
"Go for it, Tenkawa."
"Got it!" said Maihime. Using her aura, she started to draw massive amounts power into her sword. In fact, it was so much power that her sword started to crack. Just like Shino's sword earlier, her sword seemed like it couldn't handle the power she was putting into it, causing it to break down.
Actually, no. The pieces of her sword didn't crumble and break away. Instead, her ridiculous aura forcibly held all the pieces together. Her aura even caused the sword to grow even larger, creating the largest blade Shino had ever seen. On top of that, it didn't just stop at the blade. It stretched out so far that even Shino was engulfed in it.
Maihime's power was so overwhelming that Shino was struggling to stay conscious just by being near her. However, he didn't lose his grip on her shoulders, nor did he waver. He knew that he just had to keep his eyes on the enemy… Maihime would handle the rest.
"TAKE THIS!!!!!!" screamed Maihime, slamming her sword down with intensity.
In the blink of an eye, the towering Triton class in front of them split straight down the middle.

—
In the end, the students of Kanagawa successfully repealed the two large waves of <Unknowns>. News of Maihime and Shino taking down the Triton class quickly spread to headquarters, where Aoi had relayed that information to everyone in the city. Upon hearing their heroic deed, the students cheered and fought harder in battle.
The <Unknown's> formation relied heavily on the Triton class. When it was taken down, the remaining Kraken and Ogre classes quickly retreated back to the gate where they came through.
"Yo!" said Maihime. She still couldn't see anything with her swelled up eyes.
Shino didn't respond. He was on his way back to the city with her in his hands. When he got back, the students waiting for their return were shocked to see him carrying her, but quickly greeted them as if they were heroes after a successful raid.
Within those students, Ginko and Zakuro dashed up to the front.
"S-Shino, what're you doing? What's going on?" shouted Ginko. "What happened to her?"
"I thought I told you to keep her safe!" blurted Zakuro.
Maihime was having none of it, however. "Stop it, you two. Shino saved my life. Right, Shino?"
"Not really…" he muttered. "I just happened to come across her…"
"Thanks, Shino," she said giggling. She wrapped her arms around his neck.
Shino stayed expressionless; The people around him were not.
"Damn it…!" said Ginko as her face turned red.
Zakuro's face blushed as well. "T-That's not fair Shino please switch with me please please."
Even though they had all risked their lives in battle minutes earlier, it was a surprisingly cheerful scene. Not all of the students were in a good mood, however. There was one person watching from afar with her cold eyes. She scowled at the sight of Shino holding Maihime in his arms.
"You can't be doing that, Shino… You ruined the perfect chance," she grumbled to herself. "Though, you'll be dead soon, Hime… I'll be sure of it."
She headed off without saying another word.

Epilogue: The Visitor.

“The city’s saved because of all your hard work, everyone! There’s no denying that we made our country proud today… And it was certainly an honor fighting with you all! So, to celebrate, I got you all some good alcohol…”
Maihime raised a glass, and the students cheered out in response. They were all celebrating their huge victory today within a large hall in the academy. Of course, as celebratory as they were, the city was still on high alert due to them not knowing when the next attack was going to be.
The situation wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. Work hard, play hard… To them, it was just another day at the office. Even the Administration Bureau didn’t pay any attention them as long as they didn’t do anything too crazy.
Shino took a sip after seeing Maihime do her little speech on the stage. He was drinking a fruit juice; it had a slightly sour yet refreshing taste to it. The fruit, along with many other foods, had been manufactured and shipped from Chiba. Their quality was unrivaled; it would take Kanagawa several years of development to even match it.
If Maihime’s words were true, he wondered if it was really okay for them to drink alcohol, seeing that they were all still minors. The Administration Bureau had created a system that would grant them driver licenses and stuff like that, but they were especially strict on things that had a negative effect on their body like alcohol and tobacco. However, rumor has it that the alcohol was smuggled from inland and secretly brewed with the grains and fruits produced in Chiba.
“She sure is taking it easy,” said Hotaru, sipping her glass next to Shino. The sight of Maihime on the stage made her frown. “Even though one of her closest allies was a spy, giving her quite the predicament earlier…”
Hotaru always spoke kindly, so it was rare to see her talking like this. Perhaps she was already drunk.
“What she thinks and what she should do are two very different things,” said Shino. “I’m sure she’s the one most hurt by this, but there’s no need to dampen the mood or worry the students unnecessarily. As a leader, she’s making the right choice.”
“Sure.” Hotaru narrowed her eyes. “With the way you talk about her, are we even allies?”

“Enough with the jokes. Besides— ” Shino locked eyes with her before continuing. There was one thing he was itching to ask. “Hotaru, can I ask you something?”
“Hm? What is it?”
“Did you know Maihime before our mission?”
Hotaru’s eyebrows twitched. “Well, I mean I knew she was the head of Kanagawa…” she said.
“That’s not what I’m talking about… Did you know her personally? Perhaps you two were friends before going into the cold sleep?”
She gulped nervously before breaking out into an awkward laugh. “Huh? What are you saying, Shino? Friends? I have no idea what you’re talking about… Why are you asking this all of a sudden, anyway?”
“Nevermind then,” said Shino, sipping his juice once again.
“You’re saying weird things, Shino,” shrugged Hotaru. It was hard to tell if she knew what Shino was getting to. “In any case, there’s so much food out here I might as well get some. I’ll be right back.”
“Okay,” said Shino. He sighed once Hotaru was well out of sight. He obviously didn’t actively observe her like he did with Maihime, but he got to know her pretty well after working with her for a long time. The way she acted when she answered his question was a bit unnatural… He felt like she was lying.
But why would she lie about it? Was she afraid that it might interfere with the mission if he knew about her friendship with Maihime? Even if that’s the case—
“Ah, Shino, how’s it going,” he suddenly heard from behind.
He turned around and saw Ginko, Zakuro, and Aoi standing before him.
“Good work today,” said Ginko. She raised a glass, and soon Zakuro and Aoi did the same.
Shino raised his glass as well. “I could say the same. Honestly, if you three weren’t there, things would have been pretty bad. Thanks once again.”
“I’ve raised my opinion of you a little from today but don’t think that means anything.”
Aoi giggled. “You’re still saying that, Otonashi?”
“Yeah, so about today,” said Shino. “There’s still one thing I just got to ask.”
“Huh? What is it…?”
“Even though it ended in failure, Kurisu Nabariya’s plan was actually quite solid. She stayed close by to not only gather information, but also to set up the bombs undetected. Then, when the <Unknowns> just happened to attack, she used that perfect opportunity to kidnap Tenkawa. Honestly, there was no way I could have figured out she was behind all this.”
Shino paused. “So there was one thing that really didn’t make sense to me.”
“What was it?” asked Ginko.
Zakuro chimed in as well. “Yeah what are you trying to say hurry and say it!”

“Yaegaki,” said Shino as he turned to her. “When Tenkawa was kidnapped, you told us Nabariya was behind everything, but how did you know that?”
Ginko and Zakuro’s eyes both widened.
“Ah!”
“Yeah you’re right now that you mention it.”
Indeed, that was the only thing that didn’t make sense to Shino. He even heard afterwards that Kurisu had crushed Maihime’s cellphone. On top of that, there couldn’t possibly have been any witnesses, and even if there were, there was no way Aoi could have known the culprit that quickly. It was too difficult to figure everything out just from eyewitness reports alone.
“Ummmm, you see….” replied Aoi. Her shoulders were shaking nervously, and her face became all sweaty. She became even more nervous as Shino, Ginko, and Zakuro’s panda stared straight at her.
She sighed. “So umm… Please keep this a secret no matter what, okay?” she whispered.
“Sure, sure.”
“What why what’s going on.”
“Well, a while back I was helping Tenkawa fix up a button on her uniform,” she continued. “So in the button… I, umm… I, you know…”
She didn’t even have to complete her sentence for Ginko to guess what she did. “A hidden listening device, huh,” said Ginko, nodding.
“Uhhh…. Y-Yeah…” Aoi blushed.
“Woah, really?” said Ginko.
“Wow that actually surprises me a little I thought you didn’t have an interest in that kind of thing.”
“No! It’s not like that! It’s not what you’re thinking… It’s just that I wanted to keep an eye on her just in case she ran into any trouble…”
Shino put his hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry I got the wrong impression of you,” he said. He looked straight at her. “You’re an excellent Divine Pillar, Aoi Yaegaki.”
“Uhh, okay… Don’t compliment me for that though…”
At that moment, the area around them suddenly got dark. Shino thought that someone must have dimmed the lights, but instead he noticed a shadow slowly growing bigger by his feet. On top of the stage, Maihime had used her incredible strength to jump straight towards him. Luckily, Shino caught her before she hit the ground.
Now in Shino’s arms, Maihime giggled. “Thanks!” she said.
“What was that for, Tenkawa?”
Maihime ignored him and instead yelled out to the crowd. “Hey everyone! I have an announcement to make!”
Everyone in the hall all turned to her in anticipation.
“Akira Shinomiya was someone who performed spectacularly in the last battle. That’s why I’m making him part of the student council!”
“Wha—” Shino’s eyebrows shot up. However, before he could say anymore, the cheers of the students drowned out his voice.

“I see, that’s fine,” said Ginko. “A position did open up, too… Though I need to speak with him more about Hime-sama…”
“If Hime-sama says so then I will not object of course I still need to take back my stalking rights one day…”
Aoi agreed as well. “What he did in that battle alone would easily make him an excellent choice.”
“Are you three serious?”
In the end, a spy had been removed from the student council, only for an assassin to take its place.
—
Shino went straight back to his dorm once the party was over. Once there, he looked at all the photos of Maihime around his room and sighed. In the end, he had been made a member of the student council.
It was true that he would have more opportunities to kill her once he was in the student council, being close to her and all, but at the same time, he would be put under a much bigger spotlight. His motives, or even his background, could be exposed if he were to join.
With that being said, Shino felt like he wouldn’t be able to kill her even if he had the chance. He just had so many questions about the whole thing.
Why did the Administration Bureau want her dead?
Was the Hotaru she mentioned the same Hotaru that he knew?
If it was, why would Hotaru lie about it?
Thinking about all this had confused him, so Shino scratched his head and sighed once more. Yes, it was true that he was unsure about many things. However, there was one thing he was sure about— He had to observe more. He will come to know everything through his own two eyes, and once that happens, he’ll take her life. He clenched his fist with his newly found determination.
There was suddenly a knock at the door.
“Huh?” he said. Hotaru was pretty much the only one who would visit him, so it must have been her. Perfect timing, too… He wanted to confirm some things about Maihime with her.
He opened the door and called out to her. “Isn’t it a bit late to— ”
His body froze before he could say any more. Hotaru wasn’t the one who was at the door. Instead, it was…
“Good evening, Shino.”
It was Maihime. She was carrying a very large backpack for some reason.
“What are you doing…?”
Maihime scratched her head. “Umm, so that explosion earlier, right? Yeah… that actually blew up half my room,” she said apologetically.
“Oh.” Speaking of which, Shino did hear that the bomb came from her dorm in the A block.
“So, until it gets fixed, I don’t actually have a place to stay,” she continued. “So this is only temporary, but could you let me stay over for a bit?”

Shino instantly thought about the pictures of Maihime plastered on his walls, his detailed notes of her on his desk, and the telescope he had near his window that was pointed straight into her room.
With all that in mind, he didn’t know how to respond to her request.

End of Volume 1

Once again, many thanks to **Psyren - PFC** for translating the series!

For any trouble regarding the Epub, feel free to rant or complain at Regarding Being Saved by AMLNVN, I'll try to fix it.